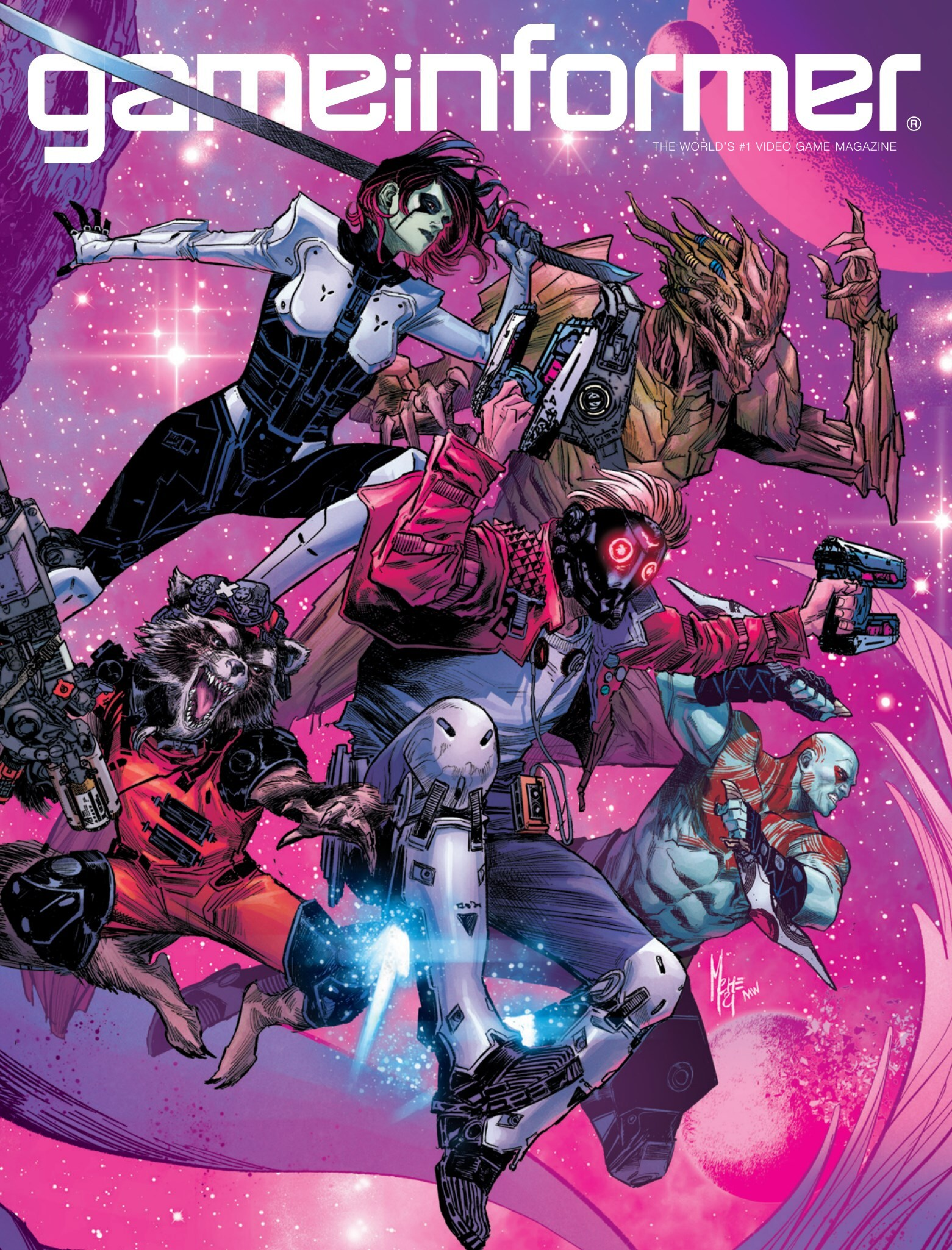
gameinformer®

THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE



PROS ALWAYS WIN THE DAY

NEW MORE POWERFUL BENEFITS ARE HERE

THE RANKS OF THE LEGENDARY POWER UP REWARDS PROGRAM GIVES YOU AN ARSENAL OF SAVINGS!

Don’t let your **$5 monthly Reward Certificate** burn a hole in your pocket – it can be redeemed toward new and pre-owned games, accessories, collectibles and more at GameStop.*

That’s in addition to all the other great benefits **Pro members** receive.

SELECT YOUR MEMBERSHIP

	PLAYER FREE	PRO $19.99/YR
NEW! $5 MONTHLY REWARD CERTIFICATE: $60 ANNUALLY		●
NEW! EXCLUSIVE OFFERS AND EVENTS		●
NEW! $5 REWARD CERTIFICATE WELCOME GIFT		●
POINTS FOR EVERY DOLLAR SPENT**	10	20
10% EXTRA TRADE CREDIT ON GAMES, ACCESSORIES & TECH		●
PHYSICAL SUBSCRIPTION TO *GAME INFORMER* MAGAZINE		●
DIGITAL SUBSCRIPTION TO *GAME INFORMER* MAGAZINE		-$5/YR

Enroll or renew today at your favorite GameStop store, or on **www.gamestop.com**

GameStop
POWERUP
REWARDS™

*Excluding purchases of select gift cards and digital cards. **Excluding purchases of GameStop gift cards.

ANDREW REINER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
reiner@gameinformer.com

Follow me on Twitter
@Andrew_Reiner

The Future Of E3

The pandemic is far from over, but life is slowly returning to normal. Having been cooped up for roughly a year and a half, we're eager to get back to doing things the way we used to. We're having talks about working together in *Game Informer*'s studio, and potentially traveling across the globe to visit game developers and attend trade shows. The one thing I think will be radically different, though, is E3.

Even before the pandemic hit, E3 was in trouble. For decades, the trade show has been the biggest event in video games; the name E3 is synonymous with new game announcements, and over the span of the show, the future of gaming was revealed. E3 was first designed for retailers and press, and then its doors were opened to fans. And then EA decided it didn't need to be a part of E3 to reach the same people. EA held its own event not far from the convention hall. Publishers started dropping like flies, and the last E3 I attended in 2019 felt a bit like a ghost town. It was a fraction of what it was. Even Sony dropped out.

Coming out of the pandemic, I want to do as much in-person stuff as I can, and I would bet most people feel the same way, which could boost the potential for E3's official return in 2022. That said, I have a feeling it will never be the same, and that we're going to see more companies host independent showcases and events. Geoff Keighley's Summer Game Fest also continues to build momentum and woo publishers into being in that show.

No matter what happens, however, it appears the industry is united in turning a week in June into a showcase of games. It's proven to be the perfect timing to show the world what the holidays hold, and in that same breath introduce what's coming next. I'd love for the entire industry to be together under the same roof again, but we all know those days are well behind us. Most publishers will likely hold something in mid-June next year, but the big question is where? Will they show games at E3, at their own satellite festivals, or create their own digital showcases? I have a feeling we're going to see a mix of it all, and more publishers filling each of those buckets.

No matter what, June continues to be the most exciting time for gamers, as we have so many new experiences to anticipate. One of the games announced this year is on the cover you hold in your hands. Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy is the next big game from Eidos-Montréal, and it isn't what you would expect. The cover art was created by the amazing talents of artist Marco Checchetto and colorist Matthew Wilson, a team that is currently working on Marvel's Daredevil books. It's one of my favorite covers to date.

Thanks again for reading this month's issue. It's packed with a number of games you'll want to put on your radar.

Be safe. Be happy. And game on!

28 Marvel's Guardians Of The Galaxy

We recently got the inside scoop on Eidos-Montréal's new Guardians game. Read our cover story for extensive interviews and gameplay impressions. ***by Andrew Reiner***

©2021 MARVEL

10 Head Of The Class
After nearly two decades at Guerrilla Games, Herman Hulst is now the head of PlayStation Studios. We talked to him about his life, career, and mission for the future of PlayStation.

14 Naughty By Nature
We talked to the two co-presidents of Naughty Dog about crunch, The Last Of Us Part II, and whether or not they like their company's name.

06 **Feedback**

56 **Previews**

76 **Reviews**

82 **The Score**

84 **Game Over: Too Many Guardians!**

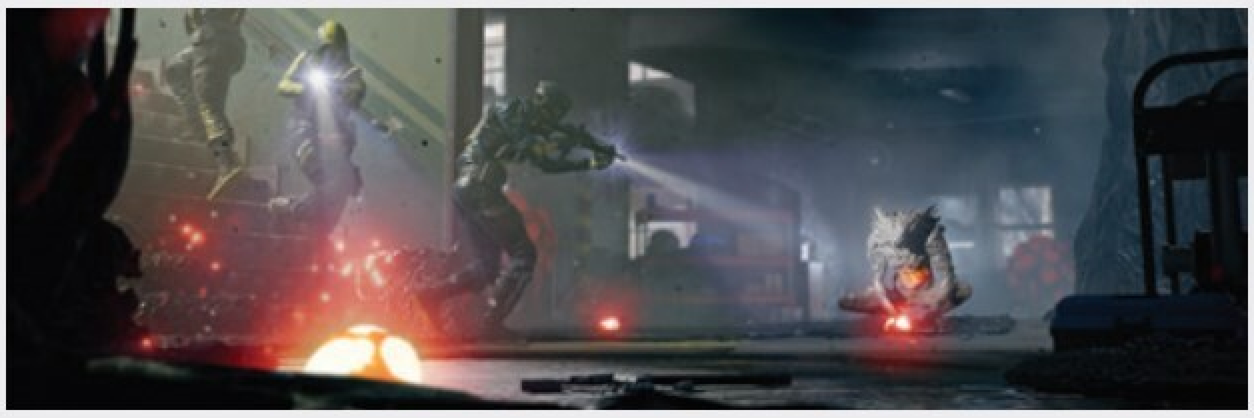
18 Summer Buying Guide
The summer months are here and the heat is on, which is why we've compiled the coolest gadgets, collectibles, and more.

42 Battlefield 2042
We recently got a chance to see DICE's upcoming military shooter; here's what you need to know.

48 F.I.S.T.: Forged In Shadow Torch
We played the upcoming Metroid-inspired project starring a rabbit with a big robot arm and are ready to tell you all about it.

52 Solar Ash
Heart Machine's last game, Hyper Light Drifter, was a hit. We spent some time with the team's next game, Solar Ash, and learned how the developer is trying to avoid the sophomore slump.

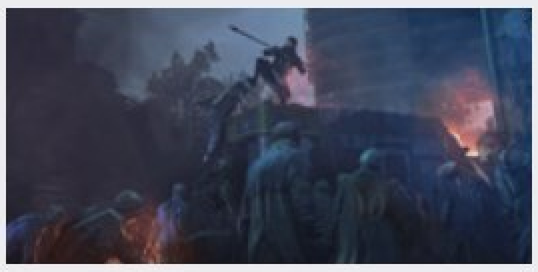
56 **Horizon Forbidden West**
Guerrilla Games recently showed off a slew of new gameplay. We talked to the team about all the upcoming changes to this hit Sony franchise.



58 **Rainbow Six Extraction**
After a name change for necessary reasons, we got the inside details about the next Rainbow Six game.

60 **Far Cry 6**
Just around the corner, here's what you can expect from your upcoming trip to the Caribbean.

62 **The Dark Pictures Anthology: House Of Ashes**
63 **Lost In Random**
64 **Kena: Bridge Of Spirits**
68 **Elden Ring**
69 **Evil Dead: The Game**
73 **Cris Tales**
73 **Norco**
73 **Sonic Colors: Ultimate**
74 **Humankind**
74 **Sonic Origins**
74 **Astria Ascending**
75 **GetsuFumaDen: Undying Moon**
75 **The Big Con**
75 **Two Point Campus**
81 **Knockout City**
82 **Aerial_Knight's Never Yield**
82 **Biomutant**
82 **World's End Club**
83 **Famicom Detective Club: The Missing Heir**

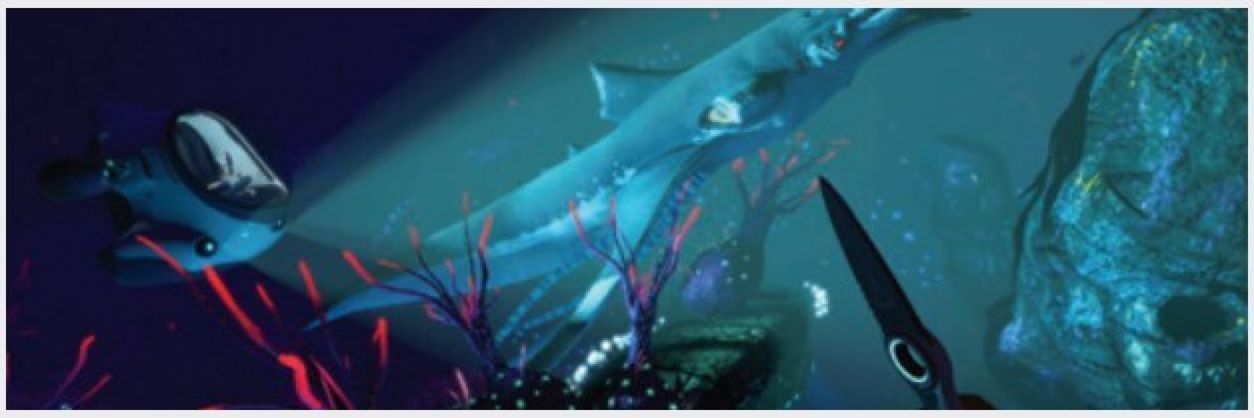


66 **Dying Light 2: Stay Human**
Years in the making, we recently gathered some new info on Techland's latest open-world zombie game.

70 **Overwatch 2**
Here are all the details you need to know in advance of Blizzard's next hero shooter.

77 **Mass Effect Legendary Edition**
Take a trip to the stars with this excellent collection.

78 **Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart**
We've played Insomniac Games' latest platformer, and we think it's a perfect reason to own a PlayStation 5.



80 **Subnautica: Below Zero**
Scared of the depths? Below Zero is sure to give you nightmares. But it's also pretty dang good.

Get Gaming with the Best Gear from VIZIO

High quality technology & content affordable to everyone.

Win with VIZIO*

VIZIO.com/en/WinwithVIZIO

5 Winners will each receive:

- 40” D-Series Smart TV
- 2.0 Home Theater Sound Bar
- Gaming console (choice of PS4 or XBox One)
- Pre-Order of Sonic Colors Digital Game Code

M-Series Smart TV

Bring every world to life.

Spectacular 4K Quantum Color, superior next-gen gaming performance and SmartCast to stream it all. With the Progaming Engine, AMD FreeSync, VRR, and Auto Game Mode, you can enjoy smoother graphics and lower input lag to dominate your competition like a Pro.

Buy Now $439.99

Product pricing subject to change based on retailer and inventory.
Device capabilities differ by SKU and may vary from product description.

D-Series Smart TV

Big time smarts in a powerful package.

Make any space a great place to watch TV, play next-gen console games, and stream all your favorite stuff in beautiful HD and Full HD. Step up your game on a TV built for modern consoles with powerful features like AMD FreeSync and VRR for smoother gameplay and lower input lag.

Buy Now $249.99

Product pricing subject to change based on retailer and inventory.
Device capabilities differ by SKU and may vary from product description.

Sound Bar

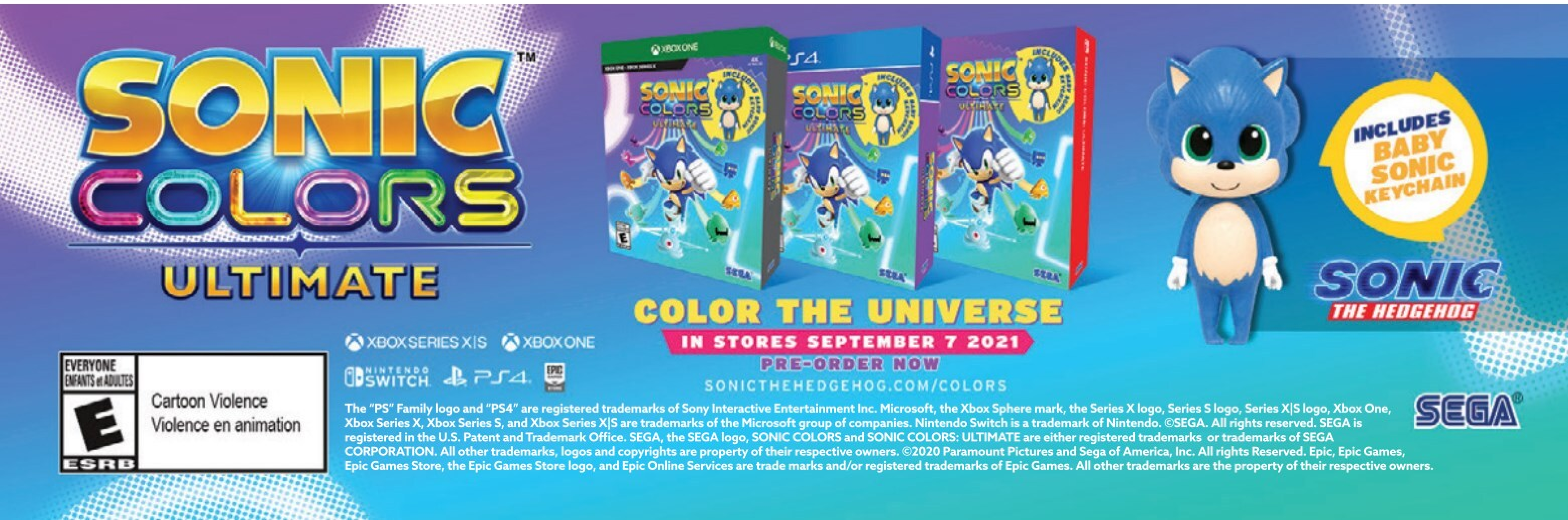
Louder, better TV sound from America’s #1 sound bar brand.

The VIZIO 2.0 Sound Bar, with Bluetooth, delivers amazing audio quality that brings your entertainment to life, in any room of your house.

Buy Now $69.99

Product pricing subject to change based on retailer and inventory.

*NO PURCHASE NECESSARY. A PURCHASE OR PAYMENT WILL NOT INCREASE CHANCES OF WINNING. Void where prohibited. Open to legal residents of the 50 United States (incl. DC) who are 18+ or the age of majority at the time of entry. Sweepstakes begins 12:00 AM PT on 7/1/21 and ends 11:59 PM PT on 7/31/21. Odds of winning depend on the number of entries received. ARV of each Prize: $649.97. For complete rules and eligibility requirements, visit https://www.vizio.com/en/winwithVIZIO. Sponsored by VIZIO, Inc.: 39 Tesla, Irvine, CA 92618.



COLOR THE UNIVERSE

IN STORES SEPTEMBER 7 2021

PRE-ORDER NOW

SONICTHEHEDGEHOG.COM/COLORS

The “PS” Family logo and “PS4” are registered trademarks of Sony Interactive Entertainment Inc. Microsoft, the Xbox Sphere mark, the Series X logo, Series S logo, Series X|S logo, Xbox One, Xbox Series X, Xbox Series S, and Xbox Series X|S are trademarks of the Microsoft group of companies. Nintendo Switch is a trademark of Nintendo. ©SEGA. All rights reserved. SEGA is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. SEGA, the SEGA logo, SONIC COLORS and SONIC COLORS: ULTIMATE are either registered trademarks or trademarks of SEGA CORPORATION. All other trademarks, logos and copyrights are property of their respective owners. ©2020 Paramount Pictures and Sega of America, Inc. All rights Reserved. Epic, Epic Games, Epic Games Store, the Epic Games Store logo, and Epic Online Services are trade marks and/or registered trademarks of Epic Games. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

feedback

This month our readers question Blizzard and Bungie's decision making, video game movies, kids games, and more ...

Psychonauts 2

I was PUMPED to see Psychonauts 2 as the cover story for next edition! It's been almost a year since we've heard anything about the game. I wasn't even sure it was going to release this year until Tim Schafer confirmed it. And now it gets center stage for the June edition? Somebody pinch me!

Aylson Matson
via email

Psychonauts isn't a name I've heard since my childhood, and hearing it again brought back a flood of great (and not-so-great) memories. As much as I loved the story and characters, the gameplay was really unforgiving and needed a lot of polish. But that's what sequels are for. If Double Fine Productions can nail that aspect of the game, look out! This could be the next big series. I can't wait to see how this one turns out. I'm guessing it's darn good if Microsoft decided to purchase Double Fine and make Psychonauts 2 an Xbox game.

Taylor Winchester
Davenport, MD

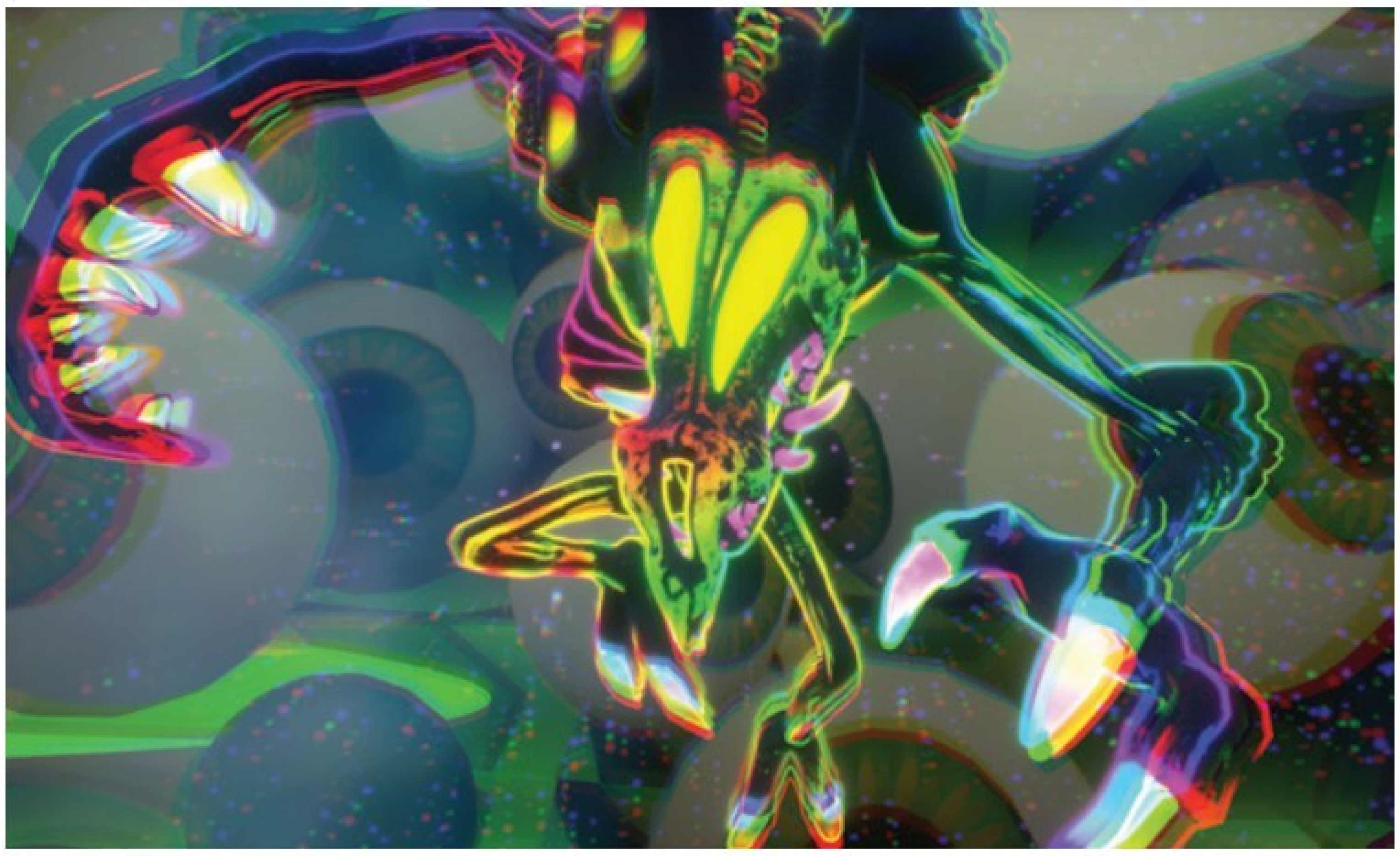
I was already the biggest fan of Tim Schafer, but after reading his life story in games in your magazine, I have even more respect for him now. He's a creative genius, but he also seems like a person who empowers the creativity in everyone in that studio. Just look at the wide selection of games that Double Fine Productions makes. It's truly unlike any other catalogue of games at any other studio. They are easily my favorite developer out there. Everyone reading this should go back and play their older games before diving into Pyschonauts 2, which sounds awesome btw!

Chelsey McIntosh
via emai

Microsoft purchased like a dozen studios years ago, and it's nice to see some games finally come from those acquisitions. I don't know if Psychonauts 2 is considered a triple-A release, but if handled correctly, it could be Microsoft's Ratchet & Clank or even Mario. That first game is so smart and funny. I could see this one blowing up big time if it's just as good.

Diego King
Brenham, TX

Pyschonauts 2 has been a long time coming, and we hope it ends up being worth the 15-year-plus wait between installments. We enjoyed what we saw of it and feel the development team has a firm grasp on what the sequel should be. We obviously don't know of all of the surprises we'll unearth on our journey, or the narrative twists and turns that could be just as wild as The Milkman, but we have to assume the game is loaded with them. We also can't wait to see how Double Fine optimizes it for Xbox Series X/S. Microsoft's next-gen efforts have mostly been absent (with a few exceptions like Gears of War). Even though Psychonauts 2 is a multi-generational release, we want to see what its true next-gen performance looks like.



Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Bethesda Games

I don't have an Xbox, and never plan on getting one. I am content with just having a PlayStation 4 and 5. What games do I play most? RPGs. Primarily those made by Bethesda. Now that they are owned by Microsoft, does this mean I'll never get any more Fallout or Elder Scrolls titles? Am I going to be forced into having to buy an Xbox just to play one or two games a generation? That doesn't seem fair. I hate console exclusives with a passion!

Ella Ford
Princeton, NJ

We don't know if The Elder Scrolls VI or Starfield – Bethesda Game Studios' other upcoming single-player RPG – will be Xbox exclusives, but we'd be shocked if they were released for PlayStation consoles after Microsoft's acquisition of the developer. Console makers building up a strong lineup of exclusives has been the name of the game since the Atari consoles were released, and it's an element Microsoft has been struggling with of late. Bethesda's catalogue of games helps give Microsoft's first-party lineup a commanding pulse, and further cements Game Pass as the best deal currently in video games. While we think these games will be Xbox (and PC) exclusives, Microsoft hasn't made all of its games just for its machines. Minecraft, for example, is a title that is a hit everywhere it lands, and it would be foolish for Microsoft to not have it on every console under the sun. Could the same be said of a juggernaut like The Elder Scrolls? We'll have to wait and see.

Overwatch 2

I recently heard Blizzard decided to reduce Overwatch's player count from 12 to 10 (from 6v6 to 5v5). This is a dramatic shift from what the game once was, moving away from two tank characters to just one. Maybe the game will be better, but it means that my friend group of six players needs to be reduced to five. From the perspective of clans that have been playing the game competitively from day one, this is a disaster. An absolute disaster. What were they thinking?

Cohen Williamsen
Minneapolis, MN

Reducing the player count seems like a bad move on Blizzard's part, but we just won't know why this huge change was made until we get our hands on Overwatch 2 next year. The community has already petitioned to go back to 6v6 – a premature move – but it shows just how concerned the fanbase is with the game's new direction. Blizzard has tried things in the past and course corrected quickly given player feedback. Adding or subtracting two players seems like a big deal in terms of balance, so it may not be a quick switch if the fanbase ends up disliking it. We'll have to see what happens, but it is a move no one saw coming or thought needed to happen.

Review Scores

How could you give both Returnal and Subnautica: Below Zero reviews a 9 out of 10. Is every game great in the eyes of *Game Informer* critics? I don't have the money to buy it all. I need *Game Informer* to tell me what the best game is each month, not say everything is great. Thanks for being shills for the game companies.

Ted
Tampa Bay, FL

Our critics give games the reviews they think they deserve, and that's all there is to it. If we could give you some advice, look at both Returnal and Subnautica, know that both are highly rated, and pick the one that best suits your gaming needs.

Video Game Movies

Given how bad most video game movies are, why does Hollywood keep making them? Don't get me wrong, I had a good time watching the new *Mortal Kombat* (even though the plot made zero sense) and thought both *Sonic the Hedgehog* and *Detective Pikachu* were cute, but I'm done with them and don't need to see any sequels. They just don't have the same vibe as the games they are based on, or the drive of true theatrical blockbusters. I don't get why we keep getting more of these films.

Stormtrooper 18
via email

Money talks. A good number of video game movies make a fair bit of money. The long-running Resident Evil series of films was wildly successful. The same can be said of *Sonic the Hedgehog* and *Detective Pikachu*. On top of being profitable, movie makers see great story potential in many games, and also love the worlds and characters that game developers have made. They fit the silver screen as naturally as comic books, novels, or any other story that makes the leap. Most video game movies have been bad because the source material was not treated in the right way and was spun into something it shouldn't have been. One of these days, a game movie is going to hit it big, and the floodgates will open, bringing many more adaptations to theaters.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"I'm a big collector of video games and recently purchased a copy of Super Mario Bros. on NES for $4,000. What's the most any Game Informer writer has paid for a game?"

Andrew Reiner says it feels like his daughter has requested he spend around $4,000 on Fortnite skins. Not many staffers have spent more than retail price on games (outside of collector's editions). We do have a few people who hunt and collect rare RPGs, and while they didn't want to divulge the specifics of their purchases, they were nowhere near $1,000.

"Did the creator of Tetris continue making games?"

Alexey Pajitnov continued making games for decades, often as a designer. His last game, Marbly, was released on iOS in 2013.

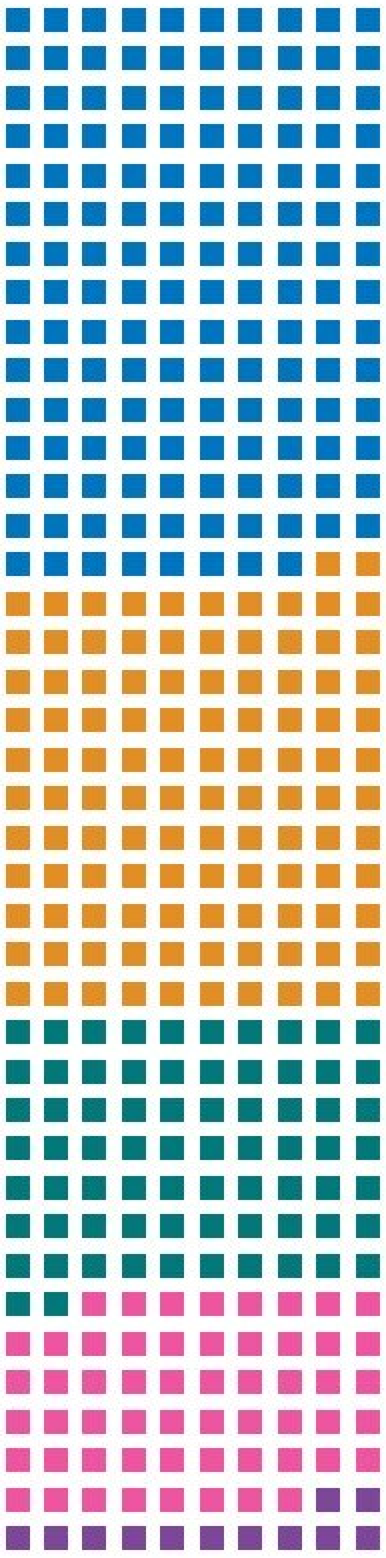
Best Comment:

"I want a free runner Jurassic World game with Owen riding his motorcycle next to raptors!"

Question Of The Month:

What comic book character deserves to be featured in a game?

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Are ready for big game announcements for the holidays
- 🟧 Are worried there won't be a new Call of Duty this year
- 🟩 Haven't been able to get PlayStation 5
- 🟥 Haven't been able to get Xbox Series X or S
- 🟪 Are asking about Epic Mickey for some reason

Destiny 2

With the release of Destiny 2's newest season, there have been quite a few controversies regarding the new armor transmog system. Part of the community is in an uproar due to the limits placed on how many armor pieces players can transmog per season without paying for more. Other parts couldn't care less. What is your opinion on the addition of transmog and how it was implemented in Destiny 2?

Matthew Gednalski
via email

Bungie hit a beautiful stride with Season of the Chosen in terms of pacing and balanced content. Transmog is something Guardians have been asking for since the first game, so seeing a seasonal cap on what players can do with their characters was a shock to many. Getting the necessary materials to use Armor Synthesis is another grind for players to take on. Some are used to that pacing, while others find it off-putting. Going the Diablo III route would have been the more player-friendly way to go, but it's understandable that the studio might like to put a story spin on this feature.

Kids Games

Video games generate more revenue than movies and are the biggest entertainment medium out there. I spend ten to twenty times more on them than movies or my streaming subscriptions. That said I can hardly find anything for my kids to play other than Roblox, Minecraft, and some weird stuff I've never heard of. There really isn't a market for kids on Xbox or PlayStation. Nintendo caters to them, sure, but my kids want to play on the current-gen hardware. Where are the games for them? Why can I find 20 movies to watch on Disney+ on day one of the streaming platform's release, and only Bugsnax and Astro as new options for my kids on PS5. I can't find anything of note on my Xbox.

K. Beatty
Madison, WI

There are more kids games than you mentioned on PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S, but you are right that there are far fewer options for the younger demographic. Nintendo does a fantastic job of creating family-friendly experiences, whereas Microsoft and Sony cater more toward mature audiences. It would be nice to see all platforms put a bigger focus on games for specific age groups. We don't have that yet. Games for toddlers and up. Problem solved.

Reader Responses

Last month we asked readers what game has their favorite story. From BioShock to Mass Effect 3, here are their answers …

The first BioShock is a game that will always stick with me because it was such an original plot. The initial Lufia on the SNES will always hold a place in my top three simply because it was the first game that truly surprised me with the story. Whether that was simply because my young mind couldn't see the plot twist coming at the time or because it was so well written, I'll never know.

Tom Petersen
Clarksville, TN

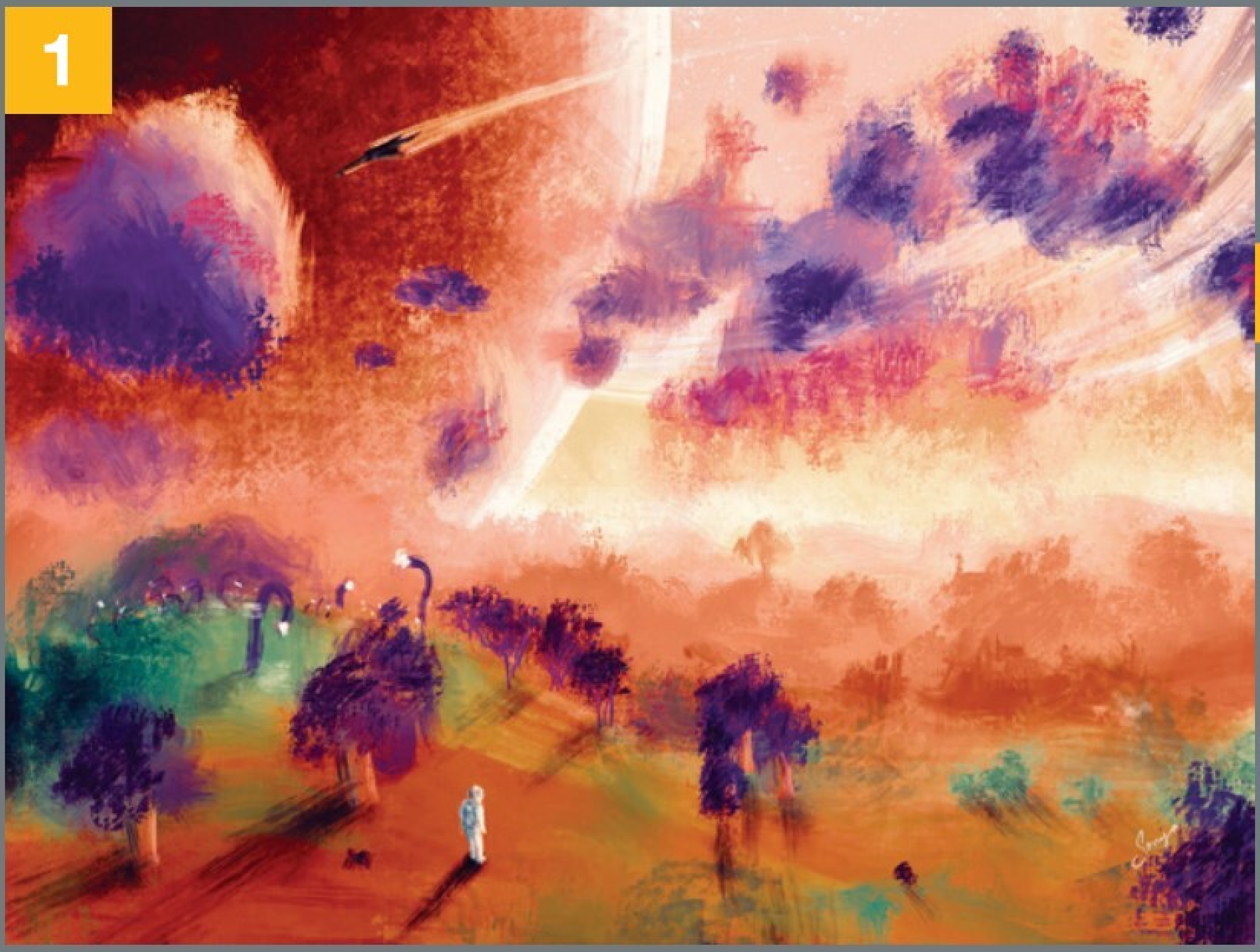
I know this is a bit odd to hold up as the greatest of all time, but I adore the Mario stories. Super Mario Odyssey and the RPG games tell such a tight and fun tale of Mario and Princess Peach. Each one makes me smile, and that's what they are intended to do. Well done, Nintendo!

Samantha Woods
Los Angeles, CA

Even though I didn't like how Mass Effect 3 ended (even after the patch), I think that series has the best video game story ever told. Dare I even say it's one of the best sci-fi stories ever told? Star Wars is king, but I think Mass Effect is a close second. I bonded with all of those characters.

Todd Karlgaard
via email

gallery



1

WINNER

1 Sonya Hammond

We've visited many strange worlds in No Man's Sky but have yet to find one this beautiful

2 Horace Wall

We know he's got an attitude, but Zagreus could at least have the courtesy to look the Bone Hydra in the eyes before he slays it.

3 Jackson Kreifels

Okay, someone really needs to have a heart-to-heart with the Goose about its hoarding issues.

4 Kayleigh Davila

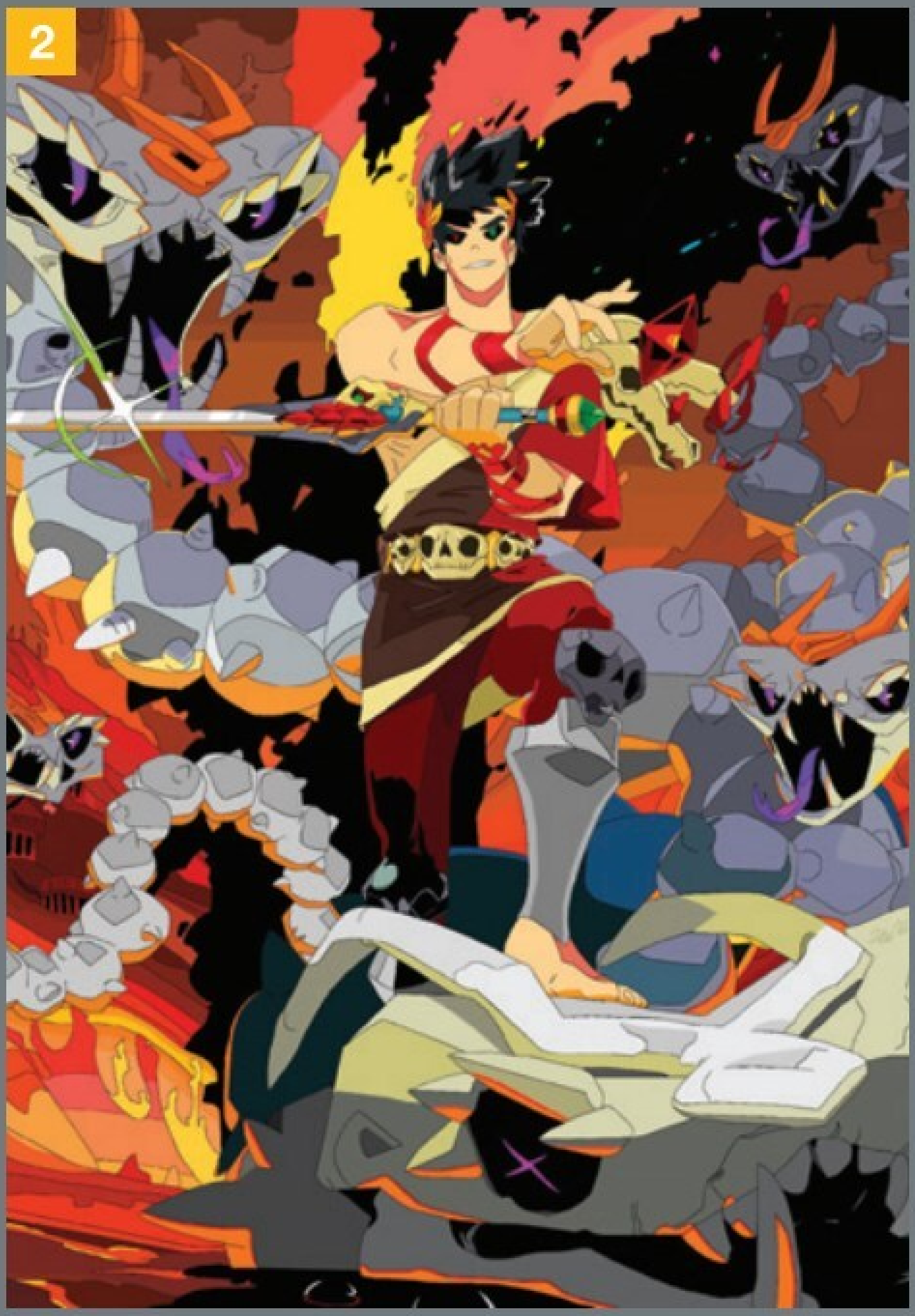
Mario tries to maintain innocence after squeaking out a fart but he isn't fooling anyone.

5 Trinide Rex

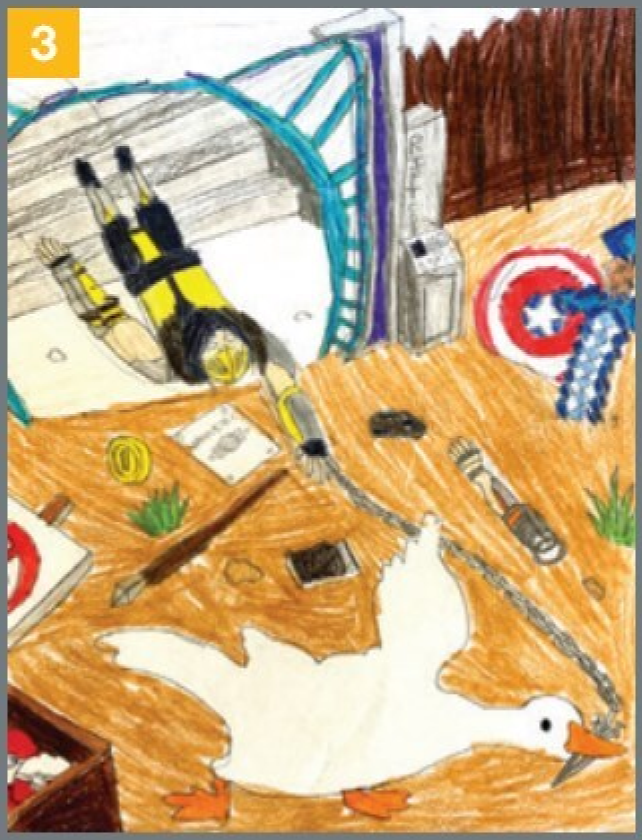
Sonic's new method of speed hopefully gets him to the nearest barber sooner than later.

6 Jazlynn Creighton

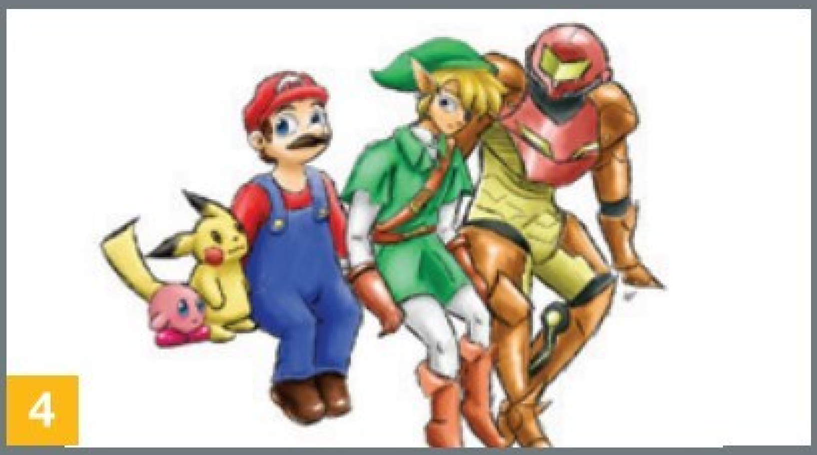
Yuna may be kind, but even she's secretly hoping Tidus faceplants right into the water.



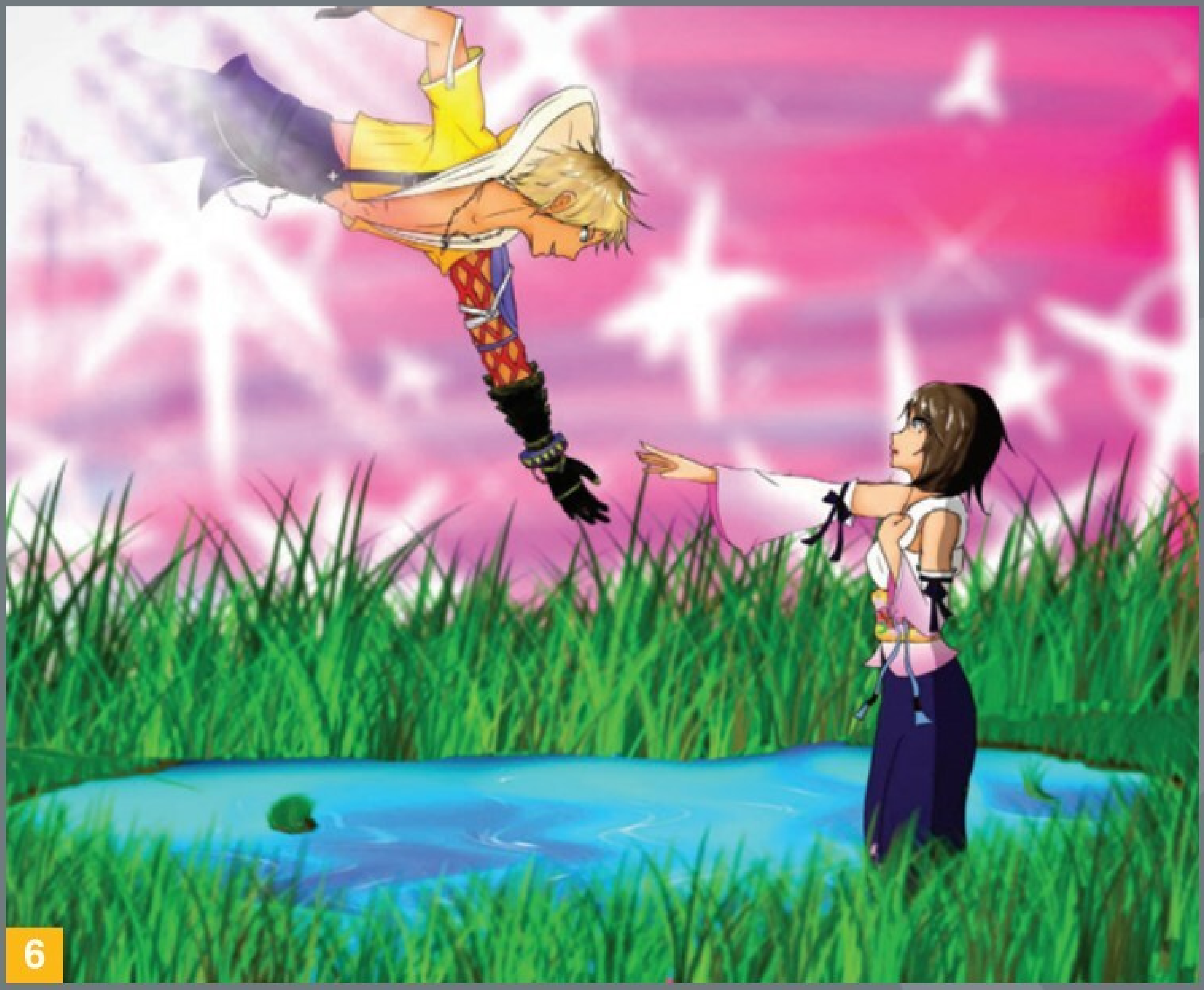
2



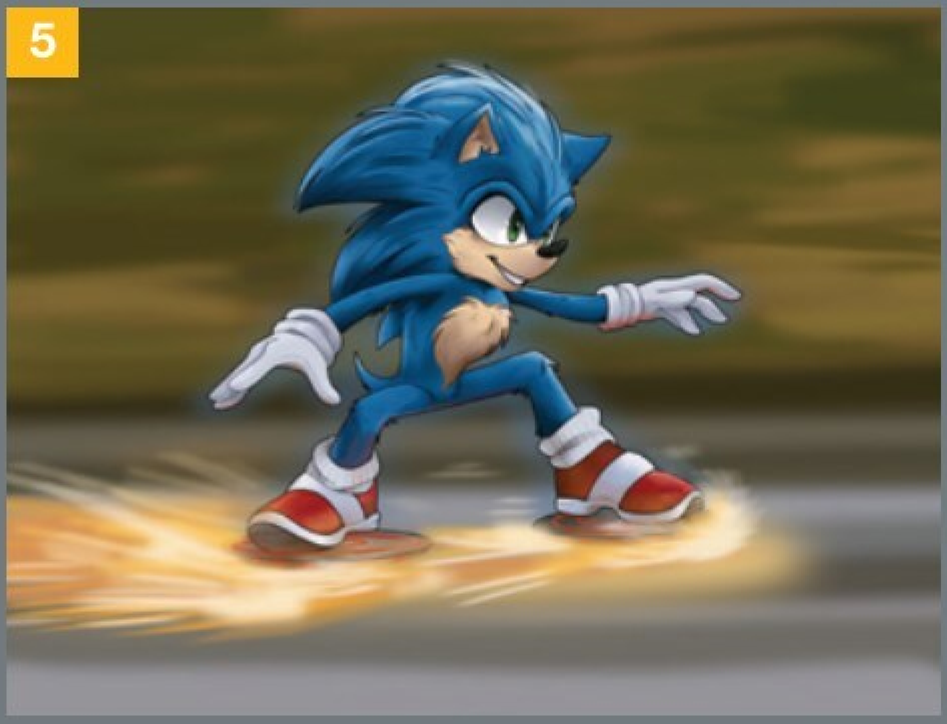
3



4

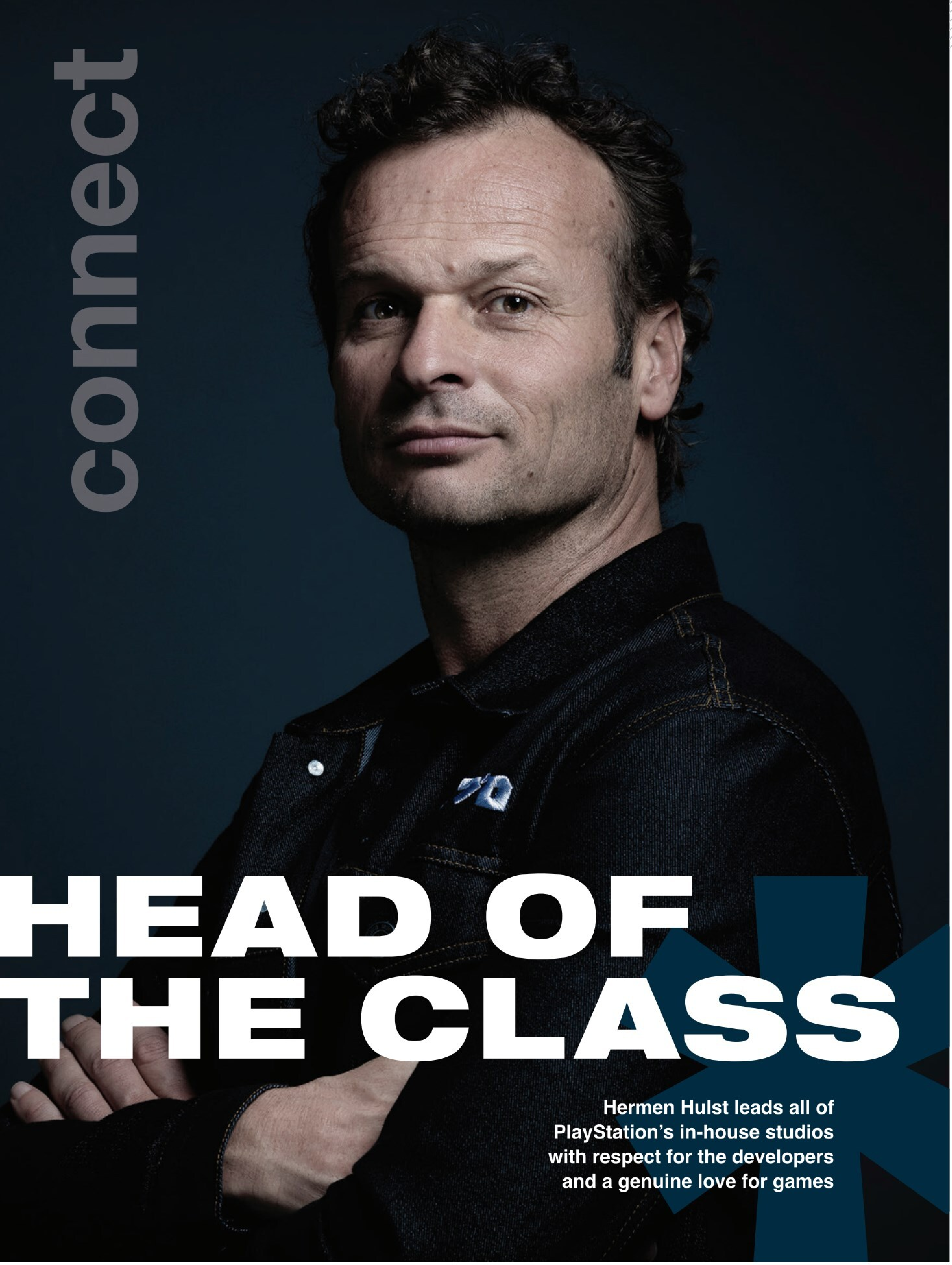


6



5

Submit your art for a chance to win a prize! Please include your name and email address.
Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media. Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com



HEAD OF THE CLASS

Hermen Hulst leads all of PlayStation’s in-house studios with respect for the developers and a genuine love for games

Hermen Hulst hasn't been head of PlayStation Studios for long, only taking over the position from gaming industry veteran Shuhei Yoshida about a year and a half ago. However, in that time, he's had to contend with a console launch, the complications of COVID-19 on game development, and helping studios launch some of Sony's most successful and inventive games, such as The Last of Us Part II, Returnal, and Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart.

PlayStation Studios is an international network of development studios creating gaming experiences. Hulst is tasked with leading the 12 internal studios under the banner and ensuring the developers have the resources and support they need. The list of talent includes industry juggernauts, such as Insomniac Games (Ratchet and Clank), Guerrilla Games (Horizon Zero Dawn), Sucker Punch (Ghost of Tsushima), Naughty Dog (Uncharted, The Last of Us), Santa Monica Studios (God of War), and Media Molecule (Dreams), to name a few.

Before taking the position at PlayStation Studios, Hulst was no stranger to the trials and tribulations of game development and what it takes for a studio to be successful. He was previously managing director of Guerrilla Games, playing a key role in shaping the Killzone series and supporting the studio's shift to its new flagship IP, Horizon Zero Dawn. But who is the new man leading the charge at PlayStation Studios? We sat down with Hulst to learn more about his life, gaming philosophies, and the path he sees forward to keep PlayStation Studios at the top of its game

by Kimberley Wallace

FINDING GAMING

Hulst grew up in the Netherlands, which wasn't exactly a hot spot for video games, but he still found a way to the hobby thanks to his mom's toy store. "I actually grew up in the Bible Belt, where there weren't any arcades," Hulst says. "Luckily for me, [my mom's toy store] had a Vectrex [game console] that had Mine Storm pre-installed. I must have been about nine or ten and I was pretty competitive, but I loved playing." Hulst would watch the older, more seasoned players, then after the store closed for the day, he would sneak in after dinner to work on getting his initials on the high-score list. Hulst recalls just loving "the intensity" and losing himself for hours on end until it was bedtime.

Hulst cut his teeth playing arcade games, but soon expanded his horizons and now considers himself a jack-of-all trades – not being attached to any genre or series. "I play different things," he says. "I am not a gamer that can be pigeonholed in one particular area." Hulst often finds himself playing whatever aligns with his current area of focus in game development. "As a gamer now, it's really hard to not be a game designer or a game maker when you do what I do," he explains. "I've gone through phases where I've played a ton of shooters, and there, I'm thinking about the concept of the power fantasy and the theater of war that you're in. Then I went through that whole phase where everything became about freedom of choice and agency and exploration when we moved with my old studio at Guerrilla Games from the Killzone days to the Horizon days."

Hulst says he thinks about things very conceptually concerning designers' intentions when he plays games, but he also gets those nostalgic feelings from his gaming childhood, too. He points to Housemarque's Returnal as a recent game that gave him the best of both worlds. "When I pick up Returnal, I go straight back to that old experience on the Vectrex," he says. "But then, I think, 'Wow, so this is a very arcadey experience, but somehow we found a way to get a layered story on top of that."

In Hulst's eyes, what makes a good, interesting game is in line with what PlayStation excels at. "I say this as the head of PlayStation Studios, and that's kind of the games we're known for – a very meticulously crafted, beautifully directed story that takes place in a world that is really inviting to spend time in," he says. "That's some of the most joy I've had in games. That definitely speaks to that single-player, narrative-driven, character-based experience that I've worked on a lot myself, that I now work on with a lot of the great studios at PlayStation Studios."

THE ROAD TO PLAYSTATION STUDIOS

Just like how Hulst didn't have a lot of access to video games growing up in the Netherlands, neither were there opportunities to pursue a career in gaming. "I come from the Netherlands, and the games industry wasn't necessarily, in the mid '90s, considered to be a proper career," he says. "There wasn't actually such a thing as game development or game publishing for that matter that you could get into." When it came time to decide on his career path, Hulst pursued mechanical engineering and business management degrees at the University of Twente in Enschede, Netherlands, and later pursued a degree in philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. But once again, gaming would find him.

While completing his studies, he did an exchange program that landed him in California, and serendipity had its way as he met some people at Ubisoft, which led to him interning at the Ubisoft office in Sausalito.

Hulst lets his guard down at the Days Gone PSX booth

At the time, Hulst says there were only seven or eight people working out of that office and its members were primarily focused on Rayman and racing games. "I kind of worked as a researcher," he says. "These days we have entire PhD-filled teams on user testing and consumer insights, but that was the job I had." Hulst said his main area of research was platformers and racing games, and he would go to schools and recruit people to answer questions like, "What is the magic behind Mario Kart?"

Hulst's job was to essentially "unpack what made a game great," and he instantly fell in love with it. It allowed him to not only think about the appeal of games and what worked about them, but also hear from other people's insights. Because the team was so small at the time, Hulst also worked a bit on the marketing side, most notably helping with the marketing plan in North America for Rayman.

It was a fun time in Hulst's life, which he still looks back on fondly. Unfortunately, once he returned to the Netherlands, the gaming opportunities still weren't there, so he worked as a strategy consultant until about 2000 when things started to take shape in what would become Guerrilla Games, the studio he co-founded and would stay at for 18 years. Even back then, his ambitions were big: "We decided, 'Let's go build this thing out. Let's try to become the best studio in Europe.'" The rest is history. Guerrilla Games made a name for itself with the Killzone series, then surprised many by taking a chance on a new IP and genre with Horizon Zero Dawn, which catapulted the studio to new heights.

He's as calm as Aloy! Hulst enjoys a walk with Horizon Zero Dawn's infamous Watcher

LEADING THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST

Hulst's role as head of PlayStation Studios was announced in November of 2019. He wears many hats, mainly working on long-term plans for Sony's games, including new IP and long-established franchises. When he's not acquiring new developers and keeping an eye toward innovation, he works with various studio heads on the company culture [see sidebar]. As Sony makes the move to turn more of its video game franchises into multimedia entities, he's also a key voice in their adaptations. And this is only scratching the surface of his responsibilities.

In many ways, Hulst considers Guerrilla Games a great primer for his role, which has him constantly interacting with developers and striving for ways to inspire and help them do their jobs better. "I think it's very helpful to have been a very active developer, and to understand all the intricacies of what it takes to make games," he says.

"[Hermen's] a philosopher and approaches decision-making through a process of curation, study, and analysis," says Guerrilla Games' studio and art director Jan-Bart van Beek. "He takes great care to find a wide and diverse set of viewpoints, arguments, and opinions in order to craft a bigger framework that allows him to make the best possible decision. It's a very 'Dutch' management style – inclusive, transparent, level-headed and carefully considered."

It's clear Hulst is passionate about games and thinking about how they work, but he's also just as passionate about risk-taking and making bold decisions. Shifting from the Killzone series to Horizon Zero Dawn was a significant learning experience for Hulst, and he takes the lessons from it into how he leads at PlayStation Studios. "I encourage our teams to be fiercely daring in their choices, and they are, but it also means that I have to back them," he says. "I think that our teams have been really brave, and that that's not just with entire franchise pivots, but it's also going into Norse mythology on God of War, it's The Last of Us Part II's narrative structure and creating an experience that is incredibly compelling but not necessarily comfortable for the player at all times. I back that; I want us to push the envelope and seek the boundaries of our medium and the state of the art of storytelling. I think that is why we do what we do with PlayStation."

Crunch And Company Culture

As head of PlayStation Studios, Hermen Hulst's job has him constantly interacting with developers, searching for new talent, and finding new ways to innovate in the game space. However, Hulst also takes his job of ensuring the members of PlayStation Studios are happy and healthy just as seriously.

When asked about crunch specifically, Hulst didn't hold back, saying there's so much more to the issue that needs to be done. "I read quite a bit of coverage on the topic of crunch and crunch culture," says Hulst. "And to me, I always think that's such a simplification of everything you need to do. I could easily say, 'We don't do crunch,' and 'I don't like crunch one bit.' But that's not enough."

Hulst speaks to a slew of issues facing developers and the different layers to them. "It can be just as stressful for a developer to be underutilized as it is to be working too many hours, or to work on something that is not clear. Or for a developer to join a studio and feel unseen, like [they're] at home and nobody knows what [they're] doing. There's so many problems and so many issues that impact the well-being of our staff."

Team Asobi experienced firsthand Hulst's care for members' well-being. "Hermen was there for us in the early days of Team Asobi as a careful mentor, making sure we struck a good balance between work and personal time," says studio and creative director Nicolas Doucet. "I think he takes great consideration towards the well-being of his people."

Hulst stresses that healthy career progression and transparency are important, as is making sure to celebrate a team's successes. "Every team does it differently because they have their own culture, but they're learning from each other," Hulst says, referencing the benefits of virtual meetings between him and the studio heads. "But I can tell you that just not doing crunches is not enough for the well-being of our developers. We have to do a hell of a lot more. And it's a very important topic."

THE PLAYSTATION WAY

PlayStation Studios houses a global network of developers, and there is a wide variety of staff in each studio and how they approach things is unique from place to place. “We’re a bunch of uniquely different creators,” Hulst says. “All studios have their own name; they all often have their own technology. They have their own style, which I nurture. I like that diversity. And at the same time, I do think that our studios are better together. We share a lot of ideas, sometimes we share technology with each other. We try to make each other better and strive for making the best possible games and upping the quality at all times.”

Now in a new console generation, leveraging the PS5 tech is essential, and Hulst is constantly having conversations with developers about how to use this new power to their advantage. Team Asobi, which created Astro’s Playroom, really helped set a precedent for what’s possible with the PlayStation 5. “Technology sharing is not always engine sharings, it’s often also ideas on implementations,” Hulst says. “A really good example is what Team Asobi did. They made, I believe, 80 prototypes, and many of those ended up in Astro’s Playroom. But in those early prototypes, that team was kind enough to evangelize and pretty much do a roadshow for other teams, in this case, particularly showcasing the DualSense controller.” Hulst says it’s very inspirational for teams to see this success early on, and also spoke to Housemarque’s great work using the 3D audio in Returnal, setting a standard going forward.

Hulst recently revealed that PlayStation Studios currently has 25 titles in development, with over half being new IP. “I want us to develop a wide variety of games,” he says. “We’re a truly global organization, developing [games] in Japan, Europe, and America. I want the games to be both bigger and smaller and in different genres.” Hulst says the PS5 launch lineup showcased this variety with a mix of internal and external developers of different team sizes creating widely different experiences, such as a triple-A juggernaut Insomniac launching Marvel’s Spider-Man: Miles Morales to a smaller studio like Team Asobi creating a family-friendly 3D platformer introducing the PS5’s capabilities.

Horizon Forbidden West, the God of War sequel, and Gran Turismo 7 are all currently in development, but Hulst also teased some new projects. “There’s a lot more that we've got in store that’s still unannounced,” he notes. “We have discussed a new partnership with Jade Raymond’s new Haven studio. I met with her and some of her team and I’m really excited about what they are working on now.”

As Hulst looks into the future, he still sees Sony’s exclusives as a big part of it, so don’t expect core franchises to jump ship to Xbox Series X/S. However, there is a chance for some titles to appear on PC sometime later, like we saw with Horizon Zero Dawn and Days Gone. “The one exception to the rule, that was MLB The Show; I think what people have to realize is that it’s actually [MLB Advanced Media] that’s the publisher on Xbox, so it’s not us,” he explains. “I honestly can’t see us doing that with one of the platform-defining experiences that we're making at PlayStation Studios.”

Hulst says that while PlayStation games have had great success on PC, the console versions still are the priority and games will hit there first. “Typically, there have been about two years between the release on our platform and the PC platform,” he says. “But you can rely on us to continue to create platform-defining exclusive content for PlayStation – that's part of the reason why we exist. It’s really important for us to squeeze the maximum out of the platform, to build showcases for the platform, and really let the audience see what these great features are contributing to the overall experience.”

Sony has been able to stay at the top of its game, and Hulst wants to keep that momentum going, saying: “We are growing PlayStation Studios,” he says. “We are investing in the amazing teams we have. We are signing up new developers. We continue to focus on quality. We continue to focus on experiences that in my mind are experiences that matter – that sometimes only could have been created by us. That’s what I stand for. And I will ensure that we're going to carry on making those.” ◆

The Future Of Japan Studio

Japan Studio, responsible for gems like Gravity Rush, The Last Guardian, and Ape Escape, went through a restructuring just this past April that re-centered the studio around Team Asobi, developer of Astro’s Playroom. As Head of PlayStation Studios, Hermen Hulst says that Japanese games are core to Sony’s identity, despite rumors of the contrary.“I will say that we are in some ways very much a Japanese company still,” says Hulst. “That’s our heritage. That’s still part of who we are. We love our Japanese games.”

When asked what the restructuring of Japan Studio means for the future, Hulst was enthusiastic about continuing to move forward in the Japanese development scene. “We’re building out Team Asobi under Nicolas Doucet, so we’re actually investing in that team. People forget sometimes that we have Polyphony Digital, which is a team in two locations. We are investing in our external development group out of Tokyo as well, and that’s a team that has obviously worked with the likes of From Software and Kojima Productions. So we are very invested in Japanese development and Japanese development is something that we love … I think it’s such a core part of the PlayStation identity that I can’t ever see us shy away from Japanese or even Asian development.”

Posing with predecessor Shuhei Yoshida at PlayStation Productions

NAUGHTY BY NATURE

An Interview With Naughty Dog's Co-Presidents

by Ben Reeves

Naughty Dog is one of the most beloved game developers in the industry. Since 1984, the studio has delivered a steady stream of hits, including iconic franchises like Crash Bandicoot, Jak and Daxter, Uncharted, and The Last of Us. But making games isn't getting any easier, so we sat down with Naughty Dog co-presidents Evan Wells and Neil Druckmann (pictured L and R, respectively) to talk about how they're shepherding the legacy of the studio, working to combat work crunch, and dealing with harsh criticism.

At first hearing, Naughty Dog can come across as kind of a silly name for a company. It definitely has a legacy now, but do you ever wish you could change the name?
Evan Wells: I love it. I think it's got a great history at this point. When Jason [Rubin] and Andy [Gavin] founded the company, they were called JAM Software, which was maybe cool back in the '80s but probably not so cool today. They were about to publish their first game with EA and they went, "There's already a JAM Software, so you've got 24 hours to come up with a new name." That's where Naughty Dog came from. I think it works. I like the name, and I wouldn't want to change it now.

Speaking about that legacy, Naughty Dog has had such an interesting history. It started making kid-friendly platformers and almost every project has gotten more mature. Can you talk about that progression?
Evan Wells: A lot of it comes through our staff maturing but also the industry and the medium maturing. Back when we were making Crash Bandicoot, we couldn't conceive of making a game like the The Last of Us, it just wasn't technically achievable. As creators we've grown through the years and we've progressed with the hardware and actually tried to stay ahead of that curve. With Crash Bandicoot, we had to have a big head with big features just so you could read the character expressions. Then when we move to PS2, we could get more detail we could go more humanoid. With the PS3, we could finally get that subtlety where you have emotion between the lines and really get the subtle facial features. Each hardware production has allowed us to delve into more interesting content.

Neil Druckmann: We have more flexibility now. Now we have the luxury of picking and choosing what style, and what kind of story, and what kind of game we want to create.

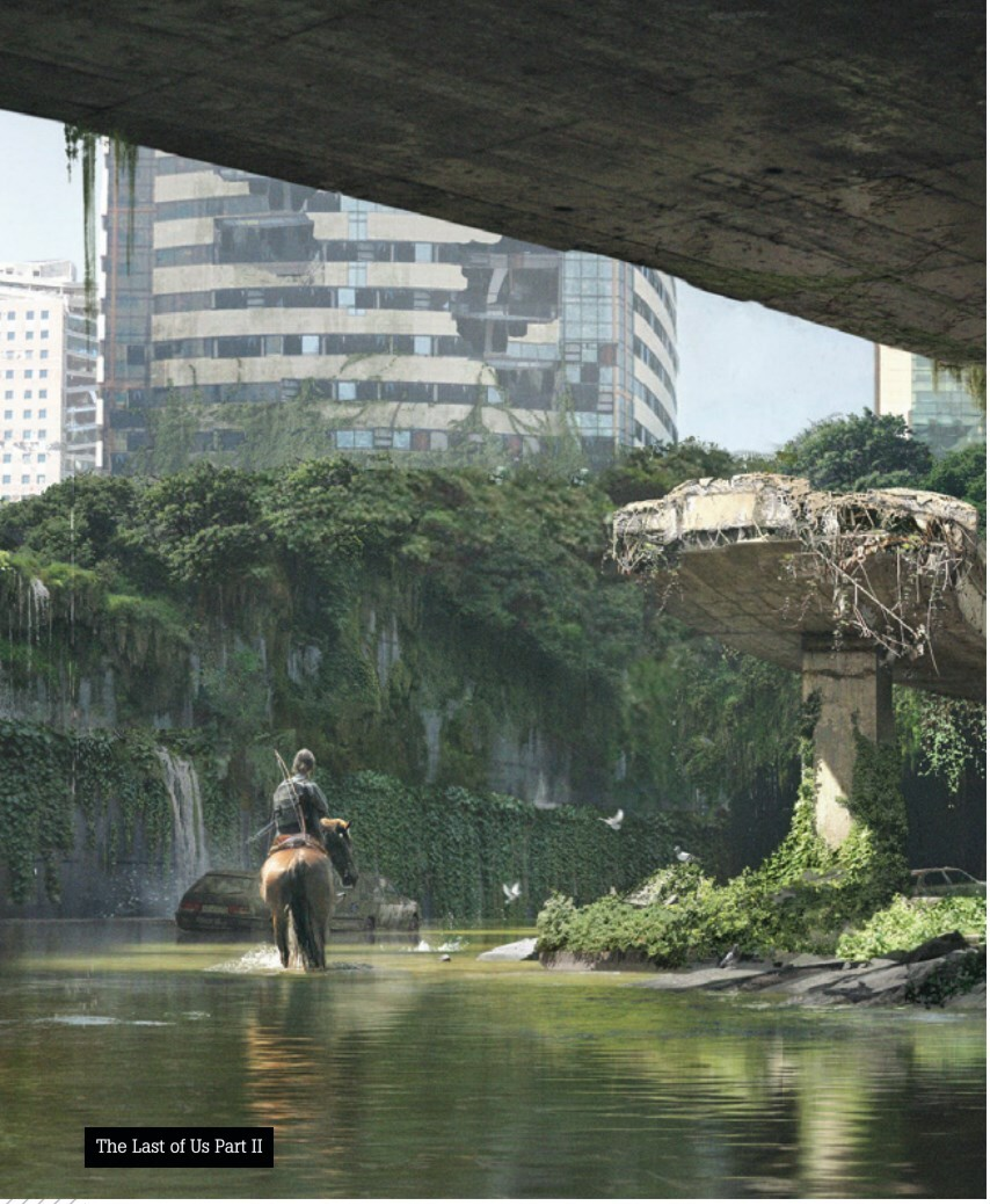
Do you have any desire to go towards lighter fare or return to your roots, to those kid-friendly games?
Evan Wells: If we had endless resources and time it would be super fun to do that. You look at what Insomniac is doing with Ratchet and Clank and it's exciting. It's great to see that stuff. We're just limited with time, you know, I'm 48 years-old and how many more games do you get to make, so you got to pick and choose.

Neil Druckmann: Once we finish a project, we spend quite a bit of time entertaining all sorts of different directions, whether it's going to be something new or if we're going back to some old franchise. We really take our time with it, and if you were to see our folders of concept art you'd see unused concepts that are all over the gamut. Then we look at everything and we ask ourselves what are we excited by? What's something that's going to challenge us and push us, and push the medium as far as games that can be? Because that inspiration is so important to carry through years of production.

A lot of fans have this perception of Naughty Dog as this crown jewel in Sony's cap, like the best of the best in the development world. Do you see yourselves that way?
Evan Wells: That's a big question. We just try to make games that excite us. We try to make games that are going to be fun to play and received well by our fans, and rewarding for the team to create. We're not really driven by any pressure from Sony to do anything in particular.

Neil Druckmann: To steal a term from someone, our brand is excellence and people come to Naughty Dog to achieve excellence and we give ourselves the pressure of living up to the kinds of games people expect from us.

You've said that you look up to studios like Insomniac, Guerrilla Games, and Sony Santa Monica. What specifically do you see them doing that inspires you?
Neil Druckmann: It might be some particular tech like what Guerrilla was able to achieve with how dense their foliage is. We looked at that, and we talked to them about that.



The Last of Us Part II

Evan Wells: You always come out with something that you could do better, even if it's not something you adopt directly. So many times you're brainstorming something in the office with your colleagues, and you look at something like, "Yeah, that's just gonna be too hard to implement. We can't go down that road." And then you go talk to another studio, and you see that they've done that very thing or something very similar and you're like, "Oh my God!" And then they talk about how it's paid off, and you're instantly inspired.

Do you have any specific examples of that?
Evan Wells: Very early on in The Last of Us Part II development, we knew that it was taking places in Seattle, and we knew that Sucker Punch had completely modeled Seattle for Infamous Second Son. We said, "We're not going to use the assets in the game, but we want to quickly feel out the space, so can we get access to those assets?" And they said, "Sure," and sent it over. We were able to quickly rough out the environment. That was a huge help.

Neil Druckmann: Another thing that comes to mind when we were talking to Sucker Punch is that we were talking about mo-capping a horse for The Last of Us Part II, and we were looking for ways to do it, and they were like, "Oh, we're about to do the same thing [for Ghost of Tsushima]. Let's double up our efforts." Motion capture for a big animal is a big deal, and we were able to just approach the problem together and use similar data, sometimes the same data for both games.

I wouldn't have even thought about mo-capping a horse. That's crazy that you did that.
Neil Druckmann: We also mo-capped dogs, and then there's a sheep sequence in The Last of Us Part II, and that's actually dogs acting like sheep.

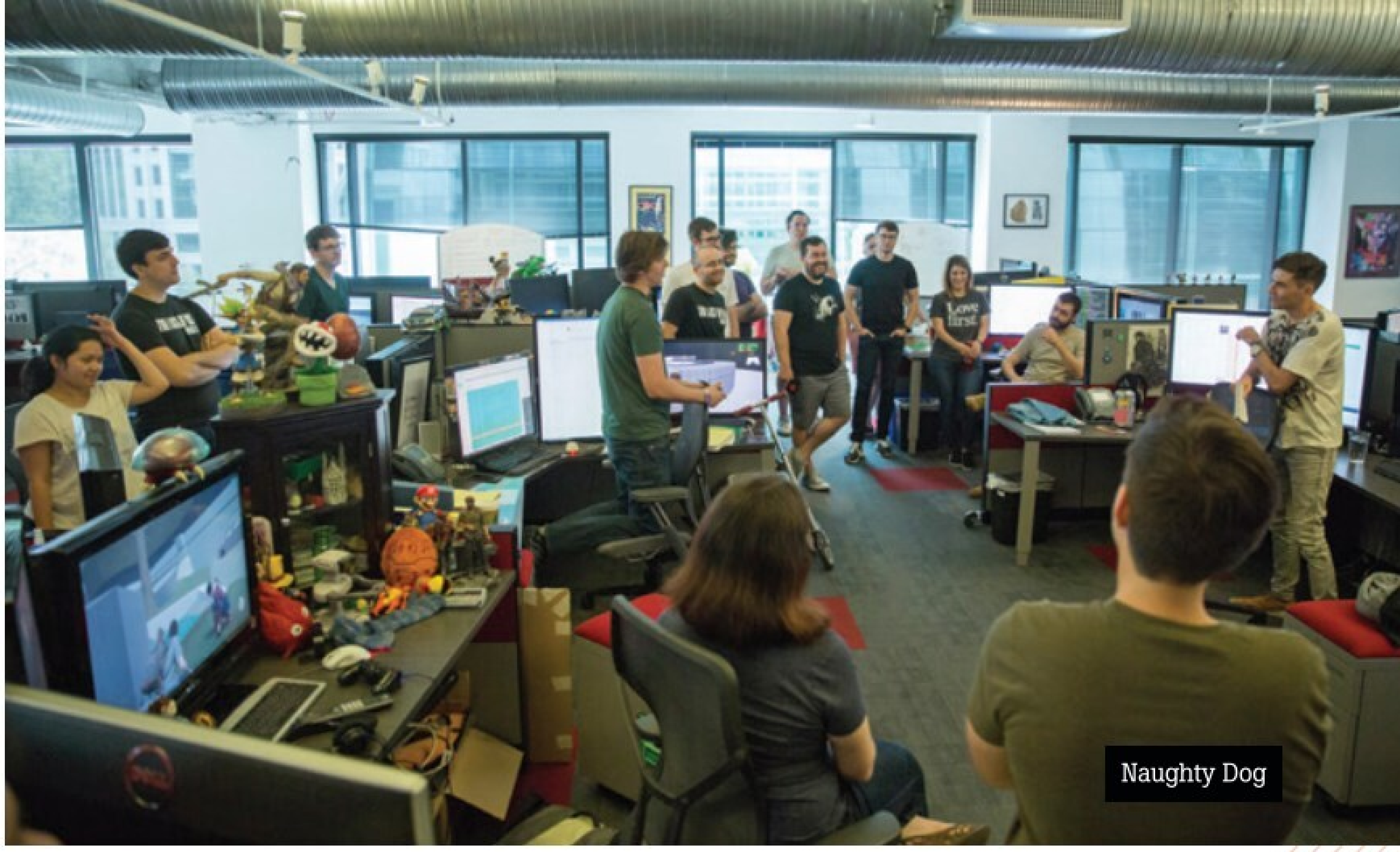
Naughty Dog has such a proven track record, but that hasn't come without cost. Over the years, you've come under fire for studio crunch. Could you speak to your personal experience with crunch and how that's affected the studio?
Evan Wells: I have definitely personally worked very hard over the years. I think some of that has helped me get to where I am in my career. As a studio, we've all worked hard together, and we are working very hard on every project to find the right balance, just like we do in all of our technical aspects of creating a game. We have post mortems and we look at how the animation went and we look at how the design went and we dig really deep into all the things that could have been better and the things we got right. We do the same thing with production. We look at how the whole game was created, and where we can make improvements and how we can strike the right balance between giving people the opportunity to – as I mentioned earlier – leave their mark on the industry and advance their craft in ways that have never been achieved, but also find space along that spectrum.

Neil Druckmann: We have so many talented people that are good at solving problems, whether they're creative or technical. Let me go back to The Last of Us Part II; some pillars that were important to us were diversity, diversity in the people we hire and the characters that we have in our game as well as accessibility and how do we make our games more accessible. Likewise, we're looking at quality of life for preventing burnout, to employ the brain power we have in our studio, and we started coming up with working groups to talk about the areas in the studio where we can improve. We worked a particular way when we're 40 people, now we have to evolve as we keep growing.
Evan Wells: Something else that we're really focused on is increasing the level of management at the studio. We have more directors and more leads, all with the end goal of giving the entire team more opportunities to provide feedback and check in on their well-being.

Neil Druckmann: Everybody has a different definition of what crunch means. And I guess for us, we think of it as, how do we look out for the well-being of our colleagues and everyone that works at Naughty Dog, which is some combination of how many hours you work and how much stress you're feeling, whether that's something that's going on in the office or at home. We find that there is no one solution that fits everybody. Everybody has a unique situation we might need to address.

One of the things that the industry has talked about as a possible solution is unionization. Do you have thoughts on unionization?
Evan Wells: I haven't put a lot of thought into that. I don't know if that would be a solution for crunch. To Neil's point about making sure that everybody is able to work as hard or as little as they want, we've got to create an environment that allows that. If we had some sort of restriction where when the clock strikes 40 hours the servers shut down and you can't work anymore, that would frustrate people to no end. There are people who really want to put in that extra polish on their own volition, and they would feel handcuffed.

Neil Druckmann: We've tried stuff, like Evan is describing, in the past where we've said, "Okay, no working past this hour," or, "It's mandatory that no one can work on Sunday," and they're always a lot of corner cases of someone saying, "Well, I couldn't work on Friday because I had to be with my kids. It's actually more convenient for me to come in on Sunday." When you try to have a silver bullet, like one solution, you're always leaving someone behind. That's why we feel like we need multiple solutions. We have to approach this from multiple angles.


Naughty Dog

You talked about ensuring that the workplace is a fun environment. What does that look like?
Neil Druckmann: We make video games, right? So many of us have dreamed about doing this when we were kids and sometimes you're in it so long you forget to appreciate it. For me it's just a constant reminder that the creative process, the putting the thing together, should be fun in itself. That's about how do you get feedback? How do you realign someone that was working on [an] idea that might not work out, but still inspire them to come back to the vision? There's an art to that.

Some companies seem to be moving away from the big, story-driven single-player games. For example, Ubisoft recently announced that it would be developing more long-tail, free-to-play games. Do you feel that story-driven, single-player games are still Naughty Dog's future?
Evan Wells: Absolutely. Yeah, and it's sort of in our DNA to tell these stories. I think that's going to continue. Single-player experiences are near and dear to us. It's what has attracted a lot of people to Naughty Dog, and that's what inspires them, so I think we're going to keep at it as long as we can.

Neil Druckmann: And again, going back to who Sony is, there has never been a mandate like, "Oh, this is where we see the winds shifting. Can you start making these kind of games instead?" We know just as they know that when you work on something you're excited by, something you're passionate by, you're going to do great work.

You basically put a bow on the Uncharted series, but you still have that The Last of Us multiplayer project in the works. Do you want to continue to work on the IP you've established or do you have a desire to create new properties at this point?
Evan Wells: I think the easy answer is: both. I think there's excitement to develop new IP, but there is still a ton of love for Uncharted and The Last of Us, and I think you'll see both kinds of projects from us in the future.

The Last of Us Part II was a big, sprawling project and it was largely well-received, but a certain segment was very critical of various aspects of the game. How did you, as a studio, deal with that?
Neil Druckmann: When we started making The Last of Us Part II, specifically, we knew we were making something that would be controversial for part of the fanbase. That's not the reason to make it, we made it despite that. Our intention is not to upset people or alienate people, our intention is to tell a story that's meaningful to us that we think has some value behind it, and is worth spending years of our time making. When we had the leaks, before anybody had a chance to play it, that's when we got a ton of negativity, and we started questioning, "Is this game going to be successful at all?" We didn't even know how much the leak really hurt us. That was really the low point for me. And it helped that some people in the studio – like [character art director] Ashley Swidowski reached out to me and said, "I just want you to know that no matter what happens, I am proud of this game. It's my favorite game I've worked on, and you don't understand how much this means to me." More than anything, that's the thing that makes me proud. Sometimes I get asked, "Do you get nervous for interviews or for doing a presentation at E3?" And, I'm an introvert and there is some level of nervousness, but I never get more nervous than when I have to speak in front of all of Naughty Dog, because there's nobody that Evan and I want to make more proud than everybody else who works on the game, because they put so much of themselves into the game. They're so excited and they're so passionate about what they're making. Those are the people I want to make proud more than anything else. If some percentage of the studio didn't like the game that would just bum me out beyond repair. As far as people on the outside, I'm like, "That's unfortunate [you didn't like The Last of Us Part II], but I stand by the game we made."

Sounds like you're saying that some of the biggest fans of Naughty Dog are at Naughty Dog?
Neil Druckmann: I would say that the biggest fans and the biggest critics are within Naughty Dog, and that's what keeps us as good as we are.

Naughty Dog

SUMMER BUYING GUIDE

Just Chatting
In Room (4/10)
Andre
James
Lisa
Camila
2

School is out, the weather is warm, and you've got some free time. To celebrate the summer months after an especially challenging cold stretch, we've gathered some gift selections to brighten up the season. Whether you plan to venture outdoors or enjoy some well-deserved downtime inside, we found a few things you'll undoubtedly love.

by Matt Miller and Ben Reeves

RIVAL
XXI-1200
1

❶ Nerf Rival Curve Shot Sideswipe

The Nerf arms race continues to escalate in the battle for dominance of your backyard. The special adjustable muzzle allows you to aim shots to curve around corners and trees to nail those tricky targets in your backyard battle. The bolt-action blaster includes a dozen spherical Rival rounds, which fire out at 90 feet per second.

$24.99 | nerf.hasbro.com

❷ Backbone One Mobile Controller

Plenty of controllers connect to your phone to give a console-like play experience, but few have impressed us like the Backbone. This responsive controller connects to your iPhone for seamless play of any game that supports controller use. Low latency along with high-quality buttons and sticks are great, but the lightning port for pass-through charging, as well as the availability of gameplay recording, puts this in a different league. And since it draws very little battery power from your phone, you can take it on all your summer adventures and car rides.

$99 | playbackbone.com

Outdoor

10:42 AM
97%
Y
X
B
A
ll of Duty
Continue playing
Back

③ Duo 2-Person Double Hammock

Whether you're looking for an innovative camping option or just hoping to play some portable games in comfort while hanging out in your backyard, this two-person hammock is stable, easy to set up, and features some smart design that keeps each person separate. There's even underfloor nets to store books, tech, or keep other gear dry.

$229 | *tentsile.com*

④ Destiny Europa Tech Dark Facemask

Even as vaccines offer hope, it's likely that we'll still be masking up this summer. If you want your protective gear to sport a bit of video game style but like to keep things subtle, this Destiny-branded face mask recalls your adventures on the snowy Europa, but only fellow Guardians will be savvy enough to recognize the design.

$20.00 | *us.ark8.net*

⑤ BigBlue 28W Solar Charger

If your love of the outdoors equals your love of tech, you're inevitably faced with the dilemma of being separated from easy electrical charging. BigBlue's Solar Charger resolves the conflict with an affordable and highly efficient solution, which folds up easily for backpack storage, but performs admirably to keep phones, tablets, and other USB chargeable devices up and running.

$99 | *ibigblue.com*

3
4
5
BigBlue
28W Solar Charger

MUSIC

BLASEBALL DISCIPLINE

Blaseball: Discipline 2xLP Vinyl Soundtrack
$39.99
iam8bit.com

***Horror Show* by The Midnight**
$24.00 (Vinyl)
themidnight.bandcamp.com

***Burn* by Foxy Shazam**
$10.00
foxyshazam.com

***Man On The Moon III: The Chosen* by Kid Cudi**
$14.00 (CD)
kidcudi.com

Family

2
Stop!
Only open this envelope when you're done with the puzzle.
THE MYSTIC MAZE

4
LEGO INFINITY SAGA
INFINITY GAUNTLET

❶ Hot Wheels Track Builder Unlimited Infinity Loop Kit

$29.99 | hotwheels.mattel.com

❷ Magic Puzzles

Injecting new life into an old hobby, the wonderful 1000-piece Magic Puzzles each feature original and whimsical art filled with tons of tiny details and easter eggs, perfect for a shared family project. The twist? Each puzzle features a "secret ending" that reveals itself only when the puzzle is complete. What does that even mean? We're not going to be the ones to spoil the surprise.

$19.99 | magicpuzzlecompany.com

❸ Loopy Loopers

Not every fun shared activity needs to be expensive. These four unique designs each offer a mix of fidget spinning and a skill-based dexterity game as you spin a marble around a central axis. Try to keep the ball spinning on a track, land the ball in a central hoop, or create your own tricks. Simple but hypnotic.

$5.99 | loopylooper.com

❹ Lego Infinity Gauntlet

$69.99 | lego.com

❺ Sailing Ship Kite

$44.00 | hapticlab.com

Pokémon Poké Ball Popcorn Popper

Add a little whimsy to your kitchen with this Pokémon Popcorn Maker. It's as easy as catching a Magikarp – plug in, add kernels, and watch as it makes a healthy snack for movie night. When all else fails ... this Poké Ball will catch 'em all – kernels, that is. **$49.99**

PRE-ORDER NOW

Modern Icons Optimus Prime Collectible Helmet Replica

Modern Icons and Hasbro are proud to present the Optimus Prime Replica Transformers Helmet. Inspired by the Generation 1 version of Optimus Prime as seen in the *Transformers* '80s cartoon, this GameStop exclusive, with unique design, is a fully wearable helmet with light-up eyes and authentic sounds and phrases. This legacy-inspired piece will add to any avid fan's Transformers collection. **$109**

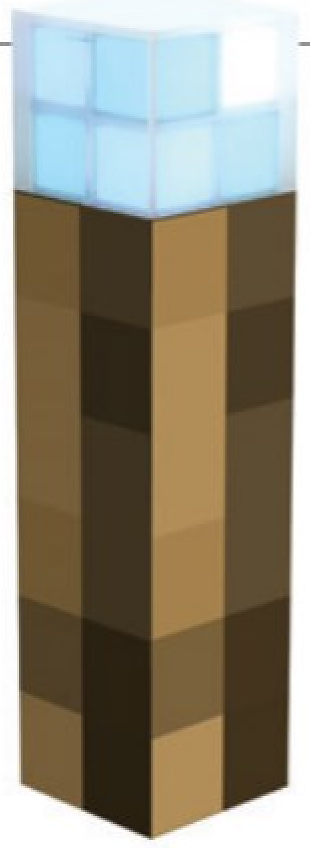
ONLY AT GAMESTOP

Star Wars *Millennium Falcon* Wireless Charger with AC Adapter

It may not look like much, but it's got it where it counts. Compatible with Samsung, Apple and any other device that has wireless charging capabilities, this wireless charger will have your phone topped up in light-speed. This wireless charger pad is also a detailed replica of the fastest hunk of junk in the galaxy, which will look super stylish and cool on your desk. Plus, the thrusters glow blue when your device is fully charged. This deal is definitely getting better all the time. Exclusive to GameStop. **$49.99**

Pokémon Pikachu Light

Pikachu's electric abilities are put to good use with this night light. It can be powered up with batteries or via USB. **$19.99**



Minecraft Soul Torch Power Bank

The next time you go on an adventure, let the Minecraft Soul Torch Power Bank be your guide. This Minecraft charger can power up your tables, smartphones, MP3 players, Bluetooth devices, and portable game systems. It's the perfect item to bring on your next quest. **$19.99**

Dice

Our 7-Set of acrylic dice is perfect for pen-and-paper RPGs. Choose from multiple colorways, including Blood (shown) and Galaxy. **$6.99**

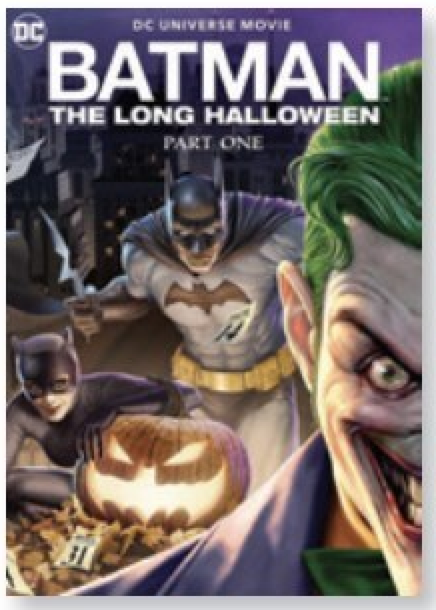
D&D Set

This Dungeons & Dragons set consists of a felt-lined tray, and 12 bronze-finished dice. **$29.99**

GameStop

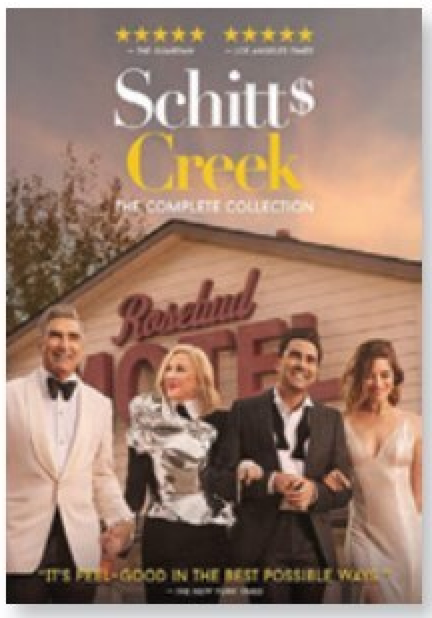
gamestop.com

MOVIES & TV


DC UNIVERSE MOVIE
BATMAN
THE LONG HALLOWEEN
PART ONE

BLU-RAY + DVD + DIGITAL CODE
GODZILLA vs KONG

STAR TREK
LOWER DECKS
SEASON 1


Schitt$ Creek
THE COMPLETE COLLECTION
Rosebud MOTEL
"IT'S FEEL-GOOD IN THE BEST POSSIBLE WAYS"

Batman: The Long Halloween Part One
$22.99 (Blu-ray)
warnerbros.com

Godzilla vs. Kong
$34.99 (Blu-ray)
godzillavskong.com

Star Trek: Lower Decks Season 1
$31.99 (Blu-ray)
startrek.com

Schitt's Creek: The Complete Collection
$59.98 (DVD)
cbc.ca

Col

❶ Transformers Kingdom Leader Megatron

$44.99 | shop.hasbro.com

❷ Star Wars The Black Series Q9-0 (ZERO)

$22.99 | hasbropulse.com

❸ Warcraft Helm of Domination Replica

Prince Arthas' fate was sealed when first he donned the helm that housed the spirit of the orc chieftain Ner'zhul, becoming the terror known as the Lich King. This hauntingly beautiful replica is a mix of polyresin, plastic, and metal, depicting the terrifying headpiece in all its wintry glory. It may not be wearable, but at over 15 inches in height, it is sure to evoke the imposing presence you recall from your time in Azeroth.

$299 | blizzardgearstore.com

❹ Defenders of the Earth Series 1

Whether you fondly remember the mid-80s cartoon, or you've always wanted some high-end action figures of the classic pulp Flash Gordon characters, Neca's detailed 7-inch scale figures are amazing, featuring great articulation and plenty of accessories.

$35.99 (apiece) | necaonline.com

❺ Star Trek: Picard La Sirena Starship

$54.95 | shop.eaglemoss.com

❻ Funko Pop! Battle-Scarred Kong

$11.00 | funko.com

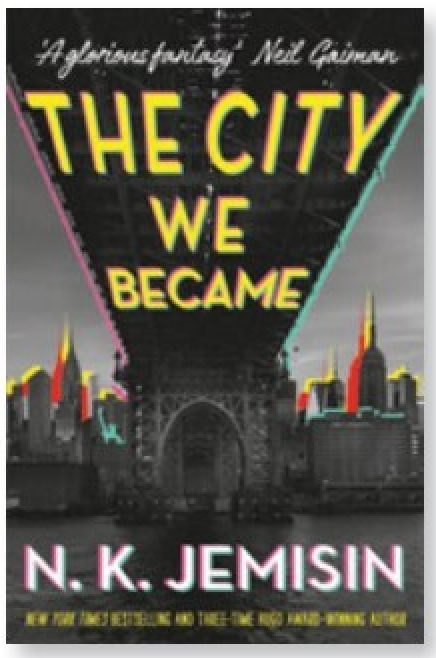
❽ Wolverine 1/2 Scale Bust

$175 | gentlegiantltd.com

lectibles

BOOKS & COMICS

20
DOUBLE FINE YEARS


"A glorious fantasy" Neil Gaiman
THE CITY WE BECAME
N. K. JEMISIN
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AND THREE-TIME HUGO AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

X-MEN X OF SWORDS
MARVEL

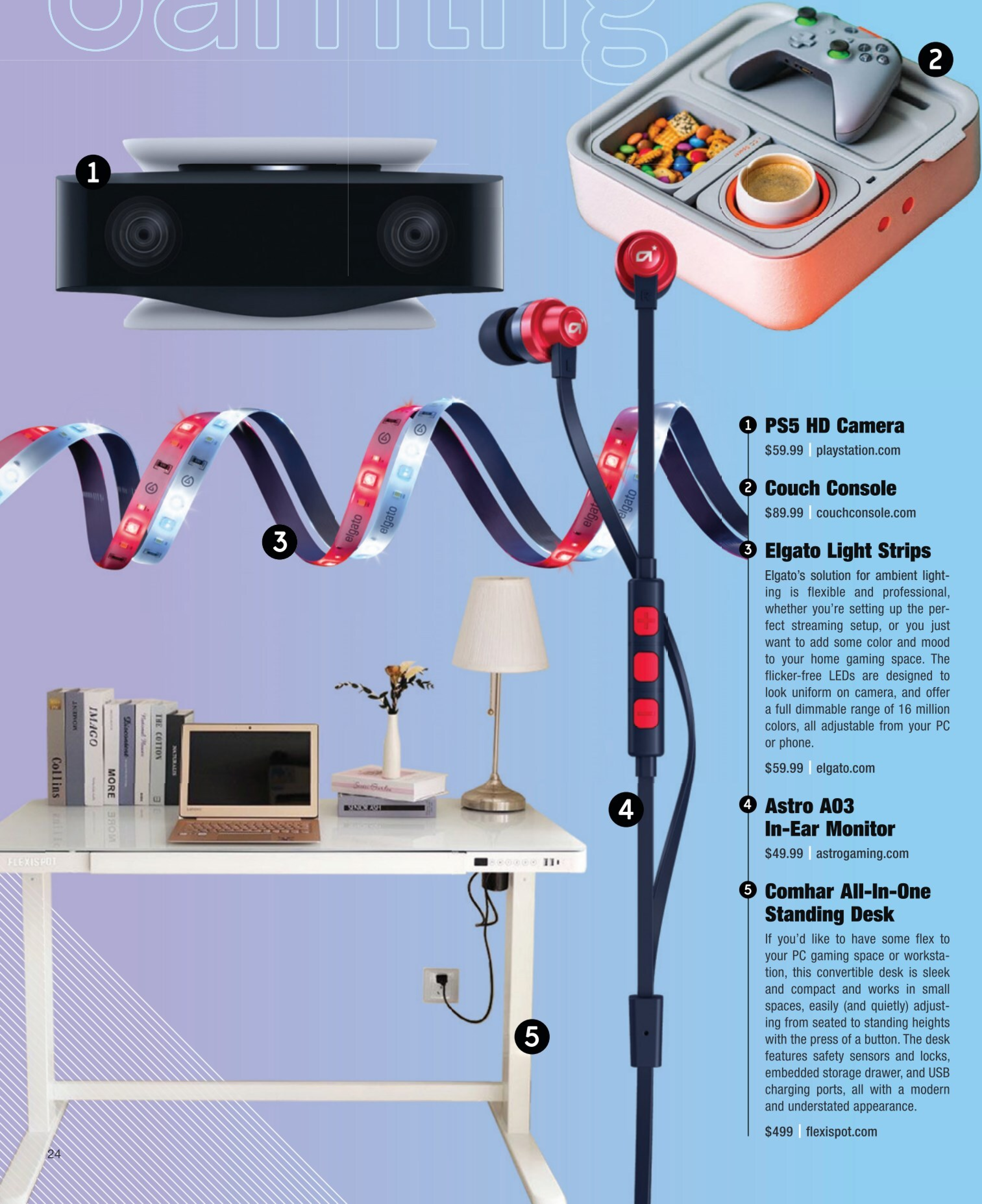
20 Double Fine Years
$56.01
doublefinebook.com

Alien: The Weyland-Yutani Report
by S. D. Perry, John R Mullaney, and Markus Pansegrau
$325
insighteditions.com

The City We Became
by N.K. Jemison
$28.00
hachettebookgroup.com

***X-Men: X of Swords* Hardcover**
$90.00
marvel.com

Gaming



❶ PS5 HD Camera

$59.99 | playstation.com

❷ Couch Console

$89.99 | couchconsole.com

❸ Elgato Light Strips

Elgato's solution for ambient lighting is flexible and professional, whether you're setting up the perfect streaming setup, or you just want to add some color and mood to your home gaming space. The flicker-free LEDs are designed to look uniform on camera, and offer a full dimmable range of 16 million colors, all adjustable from your PC or phone.

$59.99 | elgato.com

❹ Astro A03 In-Ear Monitor

$49.99 | astrogaming.com

❺ Comhar All-In-One Standing Desk

If you'd like to have some flex to your PC gaming space or workstation, this convertible desk is sleek and compact and works in small spaces, easily (and quietly) adjusting from seated to standing heights with the press of a button. The desk features safety sensors and locks, embedded storage drawer, and USB charging ports, all with a modern and understated appearance.

$499 | flexispot.com

Tabletop

1

2

3

4

5

❶ The Initiative

This fascinating campaign board game casts players as hapless teenagers who get drawn into a mysterious conspiracy. A comic-style story book gradually unfolds the narrative over multiple sessions, while the gameplay employs a combination of strategy and codebreaking to encourage genuine teamwork and puzzle solving. If you're looking for a fun, cerebral adventure to spread across the summer, you'll find a lot to love.

$59.95 | unexpectedgames.com

❷ Zombicide 2nd Edition

$109 | cmon.com

❸ Lost Ruins of Arnak

The latest competitive release from Czech Games Edition leverages a clever mix of worker placement and deck building to craft a stellar strategic experience. Players adopt the role of explorers on a treacherous island who have uncovered the remnants of a grand but lost civilization. Lost Ruins of Arnak's replay value is especially high thanks to the variety of ways game sessions can be set up.

$59.95 | czechgames.com

❹ Van Richten's Guide To Ravenloft

$49.95 | dnd.wizards.com

❺ Cryo

$59.95 | zmangames.com

AUDIO GUIDE

Go big on a budget with the Atrix E-Series Pro Black Wireless Headset

There's nothing on Earth that compares to playing your favorite games with the most immersive surround sound experience available. Unfortunately, unless you live in a home with a built-in 7.1 surround system and no neighbors to worry about bothering during your peak gaming hours, you're sorely out of luck when it comes to getting that immersive surround sound experience!

That's why we suggest gaming with a nice pair of 7.1 surround headphones. Whether you're zooming across the galaxy as Commander Shepard in the Mass Effect series or scoring the top headshot count for your team in Apex Legends – 7.1 surround sound headphones with wireless support, like the Atrix E-Series Pro Black Wireless Headset from GameStop, can maximize your immersion and make you feel like you're inside the game without costing too much or angering your neighbors.

Included 50mm drivers mean that you get to feel the bass behind every explosion and gunshot. That's great for competitive games like Battlefield 2042 and Rainbow Six: Siege, but why stop there? Racing games like Forza Horizon 4 are especially intense with the E-Series Pro - you can practically feel the rev of your high-octane engine as you blaze a trail through North England.

The included 7.1 surround sound feature means that you can tell where clever enemies are hiding by the distance and direction of their footsteps, giving you the first opportunity to stop them right in their tracks. And that's not all - you can hear far more different types of noises in games that you wouldn't normally be able to hear at all. Where distant details and sounds coming from behind are inaudible on regular speakers, the Atrix E-Series Pro allows you to hear those sounds. Not only can you actually get those added details, they're way clearer and more audible now too because of those powerful 50mm drivers!

If you're diving in for a long period of time, you'll want to make yourself comfortable. These headphones feature a weightless headband, which means that they cushion the top of your head. This extra padding keeps the headset feeling light, even when it's sat on your head for extended periods of time. If you're digging deep into your favorite game for long hours, you'll appreciate the E-Series Pro's weightless padding, and it truly makes the headset feel snug – almost like it's not even on your head.

Last but not least, these headphones boast a 20 hour battery life before they need to be recharged. This is a fantastic battery life for a pair of headphones that are meant to be used for long consecutive periods of time. Think about that; that's almost an entire day of nonstop wireless gaming with 7.1 surround sound.

The Atrix E-Series Pro delivers a phenomenally good value at its $99.99 price point, especially if you're looking to get a great surround sound solution at a reasonable price, or if you simply don't want to upset your neighbors every time you score a Victory Royale. For more information, you can visit the E-Series Pro store page directly on the GameStop website today.

GameStop

gamestop.com

Turtle Beach Stealth Gen 2 600 and 700 Offer Affordable Premium Console Gaming Audio

There's nothing worse than getting yourself a fancy next-gen console like the Xbox Series X or PlayStation 5, only to take it home and realize that your home audio solution is primitive in comparison to your new set.

If it's time to boost your audio game, then it's time to upgrade to some high-quality, high-performance Turtle Beach headphones.

STEALTH GEN 2 600

The Stealth Gen 2 600 (MSRP $99.99) features powerful, amplified audio via expertly tuned 50mm speakers paired with refined ear cup acoustics. Basically, that means the Gen 2 600 sounds fantastic and keeps unwanted noises out of your headphones. It also includes advanced audio features like Variable Mic Monitoring that lets you hear your own voice when you speak to ensure that you sound okay in the microphone.

The included high-performance flip-to-mute mic lets you flip the microphone up in order to mute yourself. It slots right into the design of the headset when flipped up, making it a super neat and space-efficient feature.

The Stealth Gen 2 600 also features a robust construction value, with a strengthened headband and hinge design to ensure that it doesn't break down over time and with repeated use within normal parameters. Its 15-hour battery life ensures that you can get a solid 15 hours of gaming between charges, after which you simply need to plug in the USB-C charging cable.

Its bigger fit means that it gives off better sound. It features ear cushions made of a soft and breathable material that keeps you comfortable for as long as you need to stay in the headphones; whether to game, watch movies, or take Discord calls.

You can find the Stealth Gen 2 600 at the GameStop store for $99.99 today.

STEALTH GEN 2 700

The Stealth Gen 2 700's built-in high-performance Nanoclear™ speakers are a step up from the basic 50mm drivers they replace from the 600. Size isn't everything, but these drivers are even more realistic-sounding and powerful than their previous counterparts. Now you can hear even more of those critical details in intense competitive game modes, but with even more granularity. Whether it's the location of an enemy squad or the direction of gunfire, your Gen 2 700 can provide incredibly realistic sound imaging that breathes life into your favorite games.

The Turtle Beach Stealth Gen 2 700 is also a step up from its 600 counterpart in another major way. It includes Aerofit™ cooling gel-infused ear cushions for maximum comfort. These ear cushions contain memory foam that's infused with a layer of Aerofit™ cooling gel, which keeps you chilled during long sessions of play. It's important to keep your cool under pressure, which is why going for the Stealth Gen 2 700 may be the best option.

It keeps the flip-to-mute mic, glasses friendliness, Superhuman Hearing®, easy access to audio presets, variable mic monitoring, and 50mm drivers of its previous iteration. It also has a 20-hour wireless battery life vs. the 600's 15-hours. This means that you can play your game for up to almost a full day straight before ever needing to charge the Stealth Gen 2 700 via USB-C cable. Its audio presets are super useful in order to tailor the exact audio experience you're looking for as well; you can choose between Bass Boost, Signature Sound, Treble Boost, and Vocal Boost.

You can find a Stealth Gen 2 700 at the GameStop store for $149.99 today!

Astro A40 TR Delivers Top-End Performance for Professional Gamers and eSports Athletes

You want to be the best and most effective gamer in your household, workplace, or wherever you usually find yourself playing to dominate the scoreboard. But the sad fact is that most gaming headsets simply aren't designed for hardcore gamers who need every single bell and whistle to sustain those super long playtimes without losing any edge.

Going with the time-tested Astro A40 has always been a fabulous option, but if you think you know everything you need to know about it given its original 2014 release, think again. This 2021 edition of the classic Astro A40 headset delivers one of the highest-quality gaming audio experiences that you can buy in 2021. And it's only in the ballpark of $149.99, making it super competitive against other similarly marked headphones.

The A40 TR features lightweight yet rugged construction, and the premium materials that it uses are unmatched in competing headsets. You will definitely want a pressure-free fit that won't overheat your head after long periods of usage, and the A40 is all about it. The ear cushions feature cloth for maximum comfort, backed with synthetic leather for the best acoustic performance, and it even comes with a swappable boom microphone.

Now let's talk about the A40 TR's phenomenal audio. This is a no-nonsense professional-grade headset that's designed for the very best in the trade. It has everything that a professional will need or ask for, including built-in powerful 40mm open back drivers (or closed, if you prefer), a 3.5mm auxiliary port, MixAmp Pro support, and Astro Audio V2 -- Astro's fantastic audio channel balancing solution.

The A40 TR is Mod Kit-ready, which means you can do your own full conversions of the headset's body and color scheme provided that you have a Mod Kit (MSRP $60 on the Astro store), you can even convert the Astro A40's open back speakers into closed back speakers with fully customizable speaker tags that you can design yourself on Astro's online Speaker Tag Customizer. And once again, the entire design balances light weight and extremely rugged durability. Its premium materials include the aforementioned cloth and synthetic leather-backed noise-cancelling ear cushions, swappable voice isolating mic, and pressure-free padded headband. There's a chrome finish to the Astro A40's whole design aesthetic too, and it simply looks fantastic.

And it doesn't even matter where you game. This Pro Gamer Certified headset is built for PC, mobile, and console gaming, so you're covered. As long as you can connect a 3.5mm auxiliary cable (included in the box) to a 3.5mm aux port on the gaming device of your choice, you can get the full benefits of the Astro A40 on any platform you're looking to dominate matches or broadcast streams from. That means you can use it with any system ranging from the Nintendo Switch to the PlayStation 4 to next-gen consoles like the PlayStation 5 or the Xbox Series X.

You can find the Astro A40 TR for Xbox and the Astro A40 TR for PlayStation at any GameStop retail store or directly at the GameStop website for an MSRP of $149.99!

Rig Gaming RIG 500 PRO HC Gen 2 Is a Fantastic Performance Headset for Xbox Gamers

Keeping your head in the game is tough. It's even tougher when you don't have a decent pair of 3D gaming headphones that you can rely on to give you proper feedback for the virtual world around you, making it easy for anybody to sneak up and get the jump on you.

It's true: staying competitive in games like Fortnite and Gears of War 5 is nigh on impossible without the right set of gear. And when you can't even hear your opponents coming around the corner, you certainly won't be able to react to them quickly enough to evade certain death. It never feels great to lose at your favorite game simply because you aren't quite equipped to play well, which is why the Rig Gaming RIG 500 PRO HC Gen 2 may be the right Xbox gaming headset for you.

At an MSRP of $69.99, this may seem like just another budget headset, but the RIG 500 PRO punches well above its weight in more than one category. Boasting features like 3D audio when you plug your headset into your Xbox controller, high-powered 50mm drivers, and a license that grants you the ability to use Dolby Atmos® for two years, you will absolutely find something to love about the Rig Gaming RIG 500 PRO HC Gen 2, no matter who you are.

Whether you're a casual gamer who is simply looking for a nice pair of headphones with which to partake in some Stardew Valley, or you're a far more hardcore player who wants to stay on top of your opponents in a competitive Fortnite match, you owe it to yourself to check out the Rig Gaming RIG 500 PRO HC Gen 2 before settling on another headset in the same price range.

The included 3D sound and attached Dolby Atmos® access allows you to hear things with incredible precision when you hook the headset's 3.5mm cable into your Xbox controller. This means that every sound in your game is positioned according to where your avatar is. If another player is sneaking up from behind you, that's exactly where you'll hear their footsteps coming from -- just like if they were approaching you in real life!

Precisely tuned low-distortion 50 mm drivers drive powerful audio signals in every frequency of the audio spectrum. You can feel the lows while getting crystal clear mids and highs, and while those 50mm drivers add a ton of oomph to games like Final Fantasy XIV and Apex Legends, your music and movies will sound clear and balanced as well. It's hard to beat great audio at such a comparatively low price, which is why Rig Gaming is offering a steal at this price.

This Rig Gaming headset is officially licensed for the Xbox Series X|S and the Xbox One, but it is also compatible with PC, console, and personal electronic devices, as long as they have a 3.5mm aux cable input that you can plug the headset into. If so, you can enjoy stereo audio on any gaming device you own while getting the full pump of the RIG 500 PRO HC's 50mm drivers.

In order to get your Rig Gaming RIG 500 PRO HC headset for $69.99, check out the official store page at GameStop today!

HyperX Cloud Core 7.1 Delivers Beefy Surround Sound for Gaming Enthusiasts on a Budget

Money is tight these days, but that doesn't mean you have to miss out on high-end personal audio features such as fantastic 7.1 surround sound for your favorite games, or exquisite headphone comfort courtesy of HyperX's very own signature memory foam. The HyperX Cloud Core 7.1 is a breathtakingly good deal for its performance, giving you many high-end features for the comparatively low price of $69.99. Needless to say, this headset is an incredible bargain, especially if you're looking to fully immerse yourself in the latest releases like Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart or Scarlet Nexus.

There are several core features that make the HyperX Cloud Core 7.1 better than its similarly-priced counterparts, and they're pretty easy to spot! After all, the HyperX Cloud core 7.1 is a super straightforward piece of equipment; what you see is exactly what you get, and what you're getting here is a fantastic piece of gear for gaming enthusiasts on a budget.

It features Virtual 7.1 surround sound, which allows you to experience games with the sheer intensity afforded by 7.1 channels of breathtaking audio. Basically, plugging in a Virtual 7.1 surround sound headset like the HyperX Cloud Core 7.1 is like listening to audio in a movie theatre. The regular set of left and right channels that you'd normally hear in a stereo headset are bolstered by left and right surround channels as well as an additional LFE channel for bassy sounds like explosions and engine revs, meaning that sounds can zoom past you from every direction, including above and underneath you.

This places you directly into the game or movie of your choice. But since everything happens in your headphones, you can enjoy your favorite games and movies in peace -- without bothering your neighbors (or your parents!) That makes the HyperX Cloud Core 7.1 perfect to bring with you on airplanes, public transportation, or even your own bed. All you need to do is plug your HyperX headset into the provided USB control box, activate the 7.1 surround sound mode, and boot up your game or movie to experience rich audio, including rich positional audio in competitive games where hearing enemy footsteps can mean the difference between life or death!

The HyperX Cloud Core ensures that you get an Immersive Audio experience with its over-the-ear form factor, closed cans, leatherette earpads for comfort and sound quality, and two whopping 53mm drivers. You're practically ensured fantastic sound isolation that makes outside noises less invasive (I'm looking at you, babies on a plane), and you can bet that you're gonna feel the kick of those drivers when you wade into an action-packed scene in your favorite movie or game. If listening to music is more your style, you're in for a treat; those 53mm drivers add up to a much richer and fuller sound, making this the headset to beat. And for $69.99, you're hard-pressed to find another headset that's as jam-packed with high-quality parts

KISS THE UNIVERSE

GOOD

» PLATFORM
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action/Adventure

» PUBLISHER
Square Enix

» DEVELOPER
Eidos-Montréal

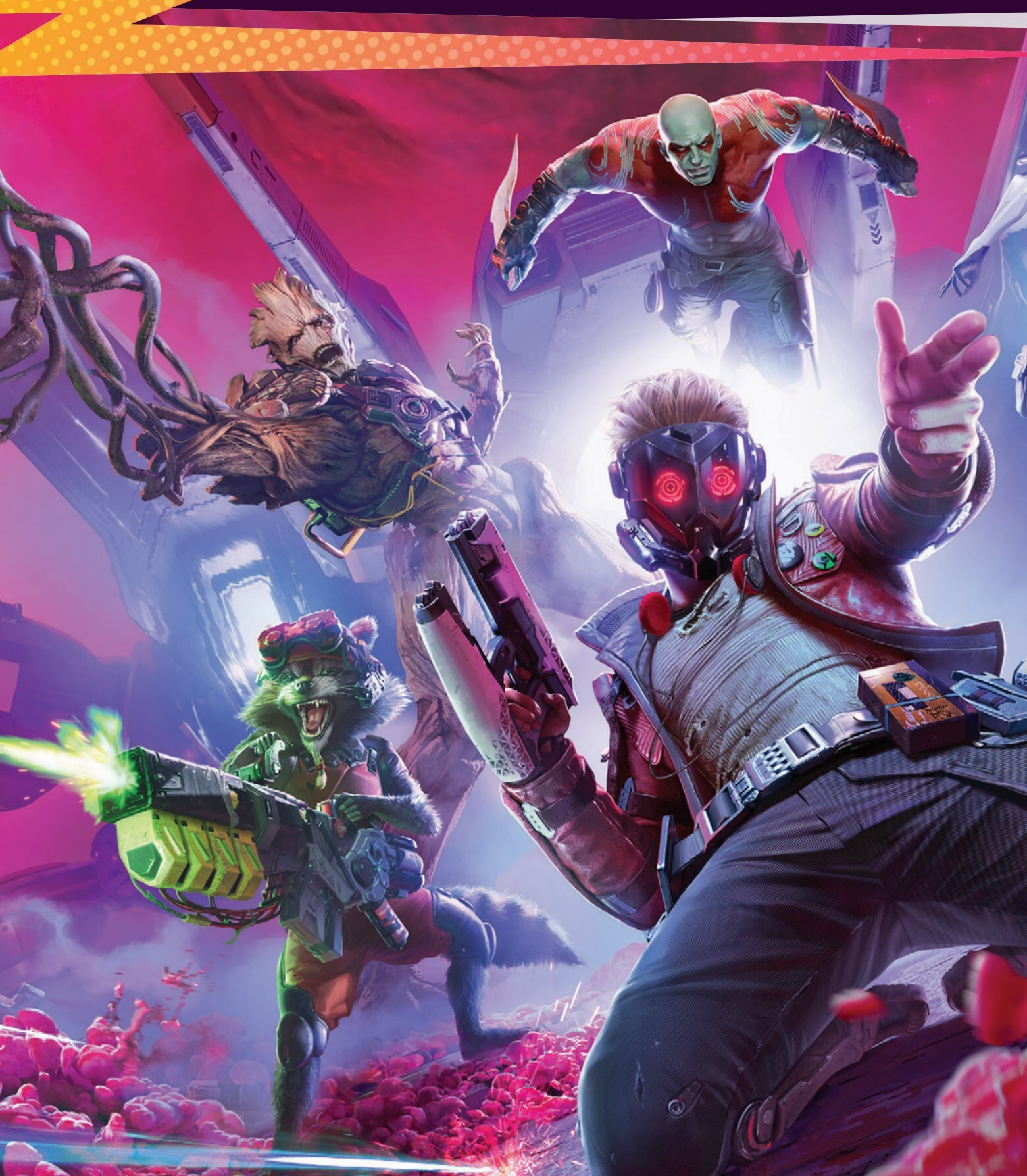
» RELEASE
October 26

BYE!

In *Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy*, Star-Lord and his crew of misfits must save the cosmos from their own foolish mistake. Their journey of redemption unfolds in a single-player, story-driven, action-packed adventure filled with narrative choice, galactic exploration, and plenty of jokes made at Star-Lord's expense.

By

Andrew Reiner



Cover by Marco Checchetto and Matthew Wilson © 2021 MARVEL

All Marvel's characters, images and designs are © 2021 MARVEL

THEY CALL THEMSELVES THE GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY,

but given the current debacle they're in, they might as well change their name to the Destroyers of the Universe. They took on a mission that would pay handsomely, but were blinded by the fortune and didn't think things through. The task seemed simple: Secure a small tentacled monstrosity and deliver it to a person of questionable character. What could go wrong? Unbeknownst to the Guardians, that little beastie they nabbed ended up having a hell of an appetite, and it continues to grow in size and might. It's poised to destroy the galaxy… and perhaps even the universe.

Thanos tried to wipe away half of all life with a snap of his fingers, but that dark deed may be dealt inadvertently by a team of squabbling drifters. They now need to fix their mistake, but how are they going to stop an alien entity with god-like capabilities?

In the eyes of longtime comic book readers, the Guardians of the Galaxy have many identities. Dating back to 1969, this cosmic super team traveled through time, visited an alternate reality in the 31st century, and were led by a hero named Vance Astro (who is every bit as cool as he sounds). Those gonzo science-fiction stories were fantastic, but never truly found an audience to keep the Guardians of the Galaxy in circulation. New books featuring the Guardians in the lead roles never lasted long.

That changed in 2008 when writers Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning met with Marvel Comics' Bill Rosemann to discuss a new superhero team that would be a part of the modern-day comic book continuity. The hope was to create a cosmic team that could potentially be the space-version of The Avengers or X-Men.

Following the popularity of a universe-spanning story called *Annihilation*, this new super team was almost named The Annihilators, but Abnett had a wilder idea: What if they resurrected the name Guardians of the Galaxy instead? Although this handle was still associated with stories set in the 31st century, Marvel greenlit the idea. That ended up being the easy part. Marvel still had to figure out who was going to be on the team. Rosemann knew Star-Lord would be the leader, given the character's popularity during *Annihilation*, but had no idea who else would be at his side. Weeks of combing through character reference books led to a group unlike any other. A team of misfits. A team of beings with nowhere else to go. A team that ultimately became a family.

With Star-Lord in the captain's chair, the Guardians of the Galaxy were born. He was joined by a group of characters that had fallen out of the spotlight. Gamora, Drax, Groot, and Rocket earned a new chance to make their marks.

As odd as this grouping of personalities is, their story contained a unique pulse that separated it from Marvel's other works. It found an audience of readers – not a huge one – but it was popular enough to release every month. Some of those readers-turned-fans just happened to work at Marvel Studios.

At a time when Thor and Captain America were lighting up the silver screen with movie after movie, Marvel took a chance on this unusual space group for a feature film. Under the brilliant vision of director James Gunn, the Guardians of the Galaxy became a household name overnight, and a foul-mouthed raccoon suddenly had his name held in similar regard as Iron Man. The Guardians' rise in stardom has only grown since that movie debuted. Marvel is making more sequels, including a holiday special for Disney+. The Guardians comic book is wildly popular. And now this group has a shot at starring in the next big superhero video game series.

With the opportunity to tackle one of Marvel's most popular current franchises, Eidos-Montréal found inspiration in some of the great modern RPGs and third-person action games, and began crafting the project these heroes deserve. The result is an adventure filled with comedic hijinks and narrative moments, but also a smartly paced battle system, planetary exploration and traversal, and character leveling. And while it may have taken some time to determine the creative direction for the project, there wasn't any debate over who should be in it, despite Marvel making it clear the studio could wipe the slate clean and reinvent the team if it wished.

In Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy, Eidos-Montréal is sticking with the team of heroes people have come to adore. At a quick glance, all five characters are immediately recognizable, but if you take just a few more seconds to truly soak each in, you'll notice they are slightly different than their film and comic counterparts. Heavy inspiration is drawn from those versions, but Eidos' take is new. Each hero's silhouette is what you expect it to be, but their attire, hair, and facial features have been reinvented. As you get to know the alternate versions of these coin-chasing spacegoers, you'll see their motivations and backstories may be different as well. The one thing that is mostly unchanged is how they act. Each character is just as colorful, quirky, and hilarious as

THAT OTHER GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY GAME

In 2017, Telltale Games released an episodic Guardians of the Galaxy game that pitted the team against Thanos and Hala the Accuser. Choice was heavily sewn into the story, pushing the Guardians to make difficult decisions, such as handing a dangerous individual off to either the trustworthy Nova Corps or the Collector for a higher bounty. The game starred Scott Porter as Peter Quill, Emily O'Brien as Gamora, Brandon Paul Ellis as Drax, and Nolan North as Rocket. Eidos-Montréal won't yet say who its voice cast is, but from what we heard of them, it sounds like a new group of actors.

Even though Guardians of the Galaxy: The Telltale Series hit as the Guardians were making people flock to theaters, the game didn't find similar success, receiving average reviews from most critics (including *Game Informer*'s 7.25 out of 10 for the first episode), and little fanfare from comic book fans. The game ended with a cliffhanger moment, but a sequel was never made.

you would expect and want them to be.

Peter Quill is the charming buffoon we've come to adore, and may even be a little more arrogant, as he's added the name "Star-Lord" to the back of his maroon duster. Groot once again communicates in just three slow words but looks to be in his 20s or 30s given his almost Hulk-like size. What first appears to be a holster strewn over his shoulder is actually a perch for his small friend, Rocket, who is also a hair older in appearance. Rocket's beard is braided and beaded, and he wears a VR headset on his forehead. Rocket may look like he has an ordinary backpack strung around his shoulders, but any kind of threat reveals it's a giant gun, which quickly transforms as it moves from his back to his hands. Rocket is as salty and sharp-tongued as ever, often walking around the room, making motions with his hands as he talks loudly.

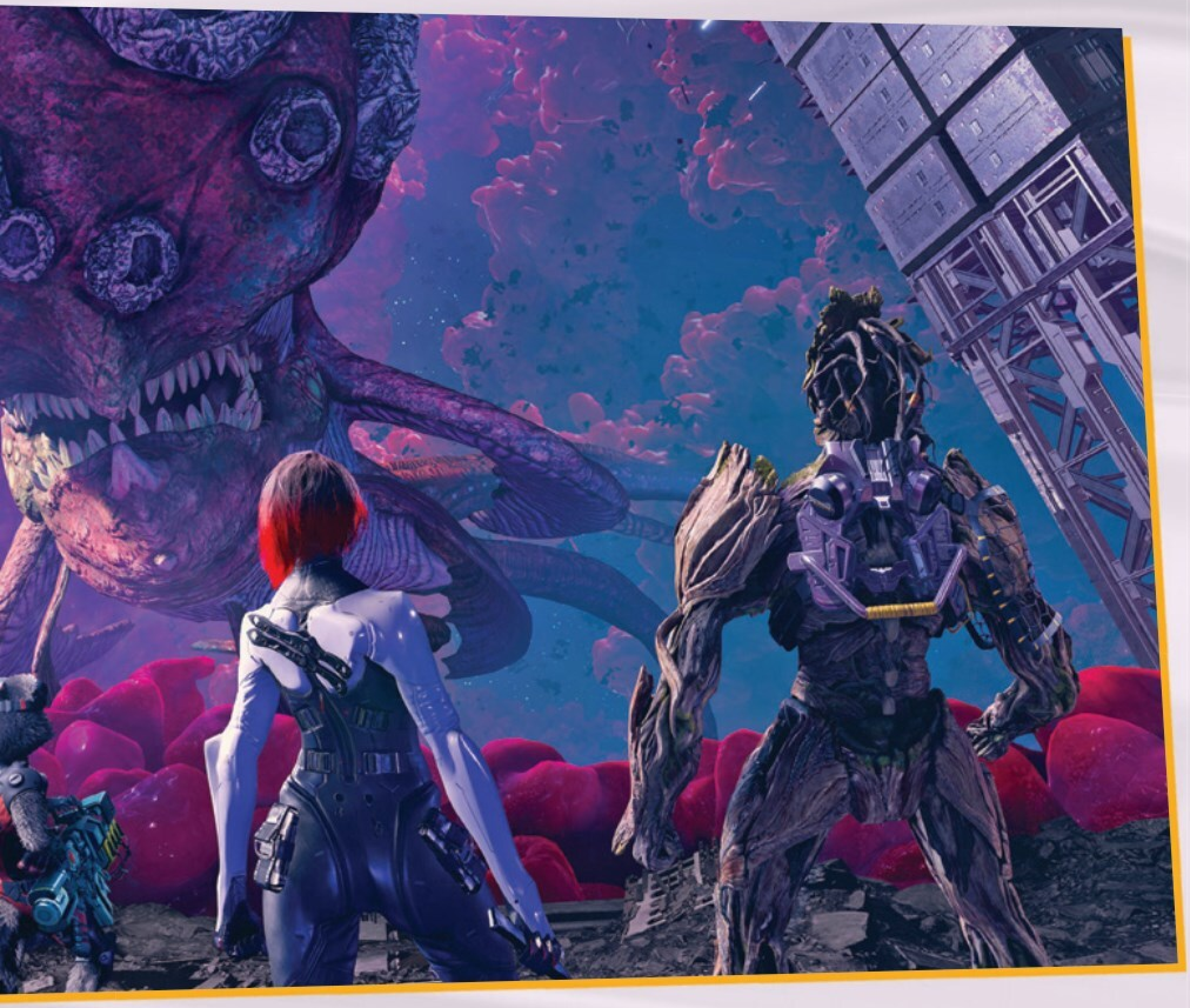
As for the true might of the team, Drax has more red ink on his shoulders, and appears to be a little more intelligent than his movie counterpart, but also proves to be just as clueless at times – moments that are used nicely for comedic purposes. Of all the Guardians, Gamora seems to be the most different in terms of appearance. Her eyes are outlined in thick black, almost looking like a superhero's mask, and her hair is a mix of black and red. She wears white and black armor.

In one of Eidos-Montréal's first development meetings for this project, discussions swirled around the idea of making a team-based or cooperative game. Given the number of characters in the Guardians team, those talks carried serious weight, but were in sharp contrast to the work the studio has done in the past, especially on the then-recently released single-player Deus Ex titles. Eidos-Montréal didn't want to abandon its expertise in that field, and eventually settled on a concept called "solo teamplay," which gives the player a singular viewpoint into the story and gameplay, while still having a hand in many of the team's actions, almost like a puppeteer pulling its strings. As Peter ignites his jet boots and soars across the battlefield with dual pistols blazing, his teammates are below him, using their talents to decimate alien forces. He can then call on them with a click of a button to perform devastating attacks – that can also be combined with those of the other characters.

"Lots of focus testing and discussions went into making sure we were making the right call," says senior producer Olivier Proulx. "Even with Marvel. People would ask me, 'Did you do this to save costs?' and things like that. That is not the case. It boils down to how we can make you feel like you are a part of this team."

According to Eidos-Montréal, there was no discussion over who would be the singular controllable hero. It had to be Star-Lord. "We wanted to put you in the shoes of Peter Quill and be the so-called leader who is making decisions," says game director Jean-François Dugas, who excitedly talks to me over a Zoom call. He's seated in front of a screenshot from the game that shows a starfield filled with metal debris, all of it connected by a gooey, vibrant pink spiderweb.

With Star-Lord in the lead role, and the other heroes always just a button press away, Eidos-Montréal knew it had something special on its hands – a team-based game that moved to the beat of its own drum, just like the Guardians do. That vision also allowed for the studio's love of player choice to be woven into the narrative, which appears to be every bit as cinematic and ambitious as Insomniac Games' Marvel's Spider-Man series. Even with player decisions changing some of the story, it's linear in design, and everyone will experience the same moments and ending (with little variations littered liberally along the way depending on what actions they take). The narrative is massive in scope, sending players to a multitude of planets where an even greater number of characters and surprises await.



NOT AN ORIGIN STORY, BUT A NEW BEGINNING

A hot trend in superhero video games is to start a story in the middle. Insomniac's Marvel's Spider-Man began with Peter Parker in his prime, finally taking down Kingpin after battling him for nearly a decade. Crystal Dynamics' Marvel's Avengers kicked off with Captain America's death and the super team disbanding. Eidos-Montréal is following in these footsteps with Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy's story beginning roughly one year after Peter Quill assembled his squad.

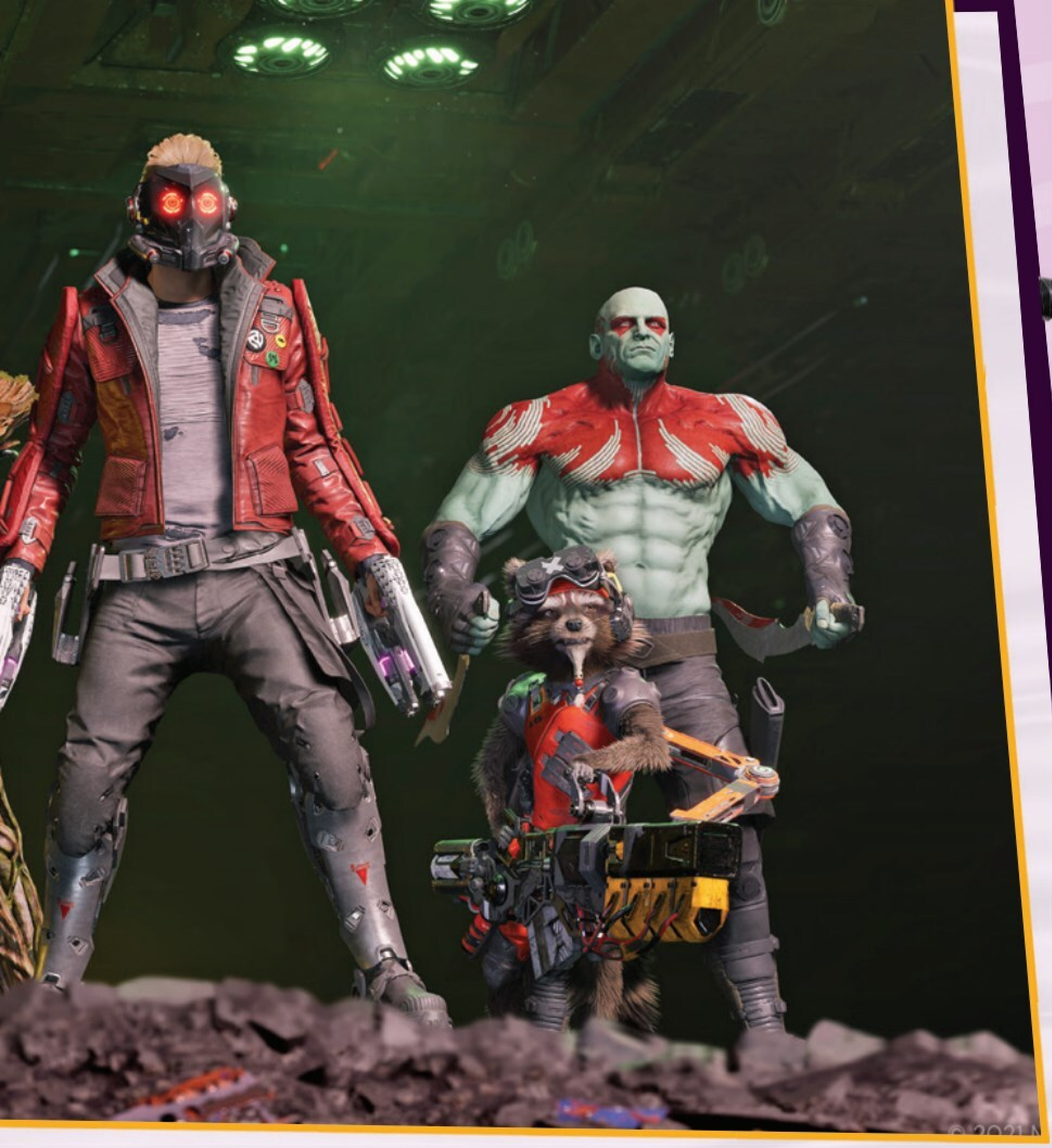
They came together mostly for financial prosperity. "Peter gets them all together with the promise that there is a lot of money and a great deal of adventure to be had," says Mary DeMarle, the project's senior narrative director. "The team has been together for a little over a year. Just long enough to know each other, but not long enough to gel." Their stance at the beginning is "heroes for hire," willing to do a little bit of good and a little bit of bad for the right price.

The formation of the Guardians is indirectly linked to a galactic war that swept across the entire universe roughly 12 years ago. This conflict pitted Thanos and his Chitauri faithful against the Kree and their allied factions.

Most advanced civilizations were linked to the war in some way, including the Spartax Empire, with Peter Quill's father seated as its king. At the start of the war, the Spartax race tried to keep a neutral stance, but Peter was kidnapped and used as a bargaining chip. Gamora was loyal to her father Thanos until she realized what he was truly trying to achieve, which forced her to switch sides to the resistance. Even though she battled against her own kind, no one trusted her because of her lineage. Drax lost his entire family in the war, which led to his rampage against Thanos.

In a story moment that won't be told in-game, DeMarle says that the first Guardians to be recruited were Rocket and Groot. "They were after [Peter] for a bounty, and he was able to twist that and convince them that they would have a lot more fun and make a lot more money with him," she says. "And then they were like, 'If this is going to be a true marketing thing [the Guardians of the Galaxy gimmick] then we need to get powerful people like Drax, the Destroyer.'"

Eidos-Montréal's story shows how strong bonds are formed between the Guardians. Sure, they'll still bicker with one another and take cheap shots whenever they can, but this narrative arc will show us how they unite as a team while taking on a great threat. They still are the Guardians, however, so that means they are each wildly unpredictable, and the plot twists will reflect that powder-keg trait.



"I wanted to build a story that is really impactful," says DeMarle. "At times you're laughing like crazy, and then all of a sudden we hit you and bring you almost to tears."

I didn't see any dramatic moments in the 18 minutes of footage Eidos-Montréal showed me, but I was treated to several brief sequences showing playful banter and a number of great jokes. The dysfunctional chemistry between all the team members is alive and well in these scenes.

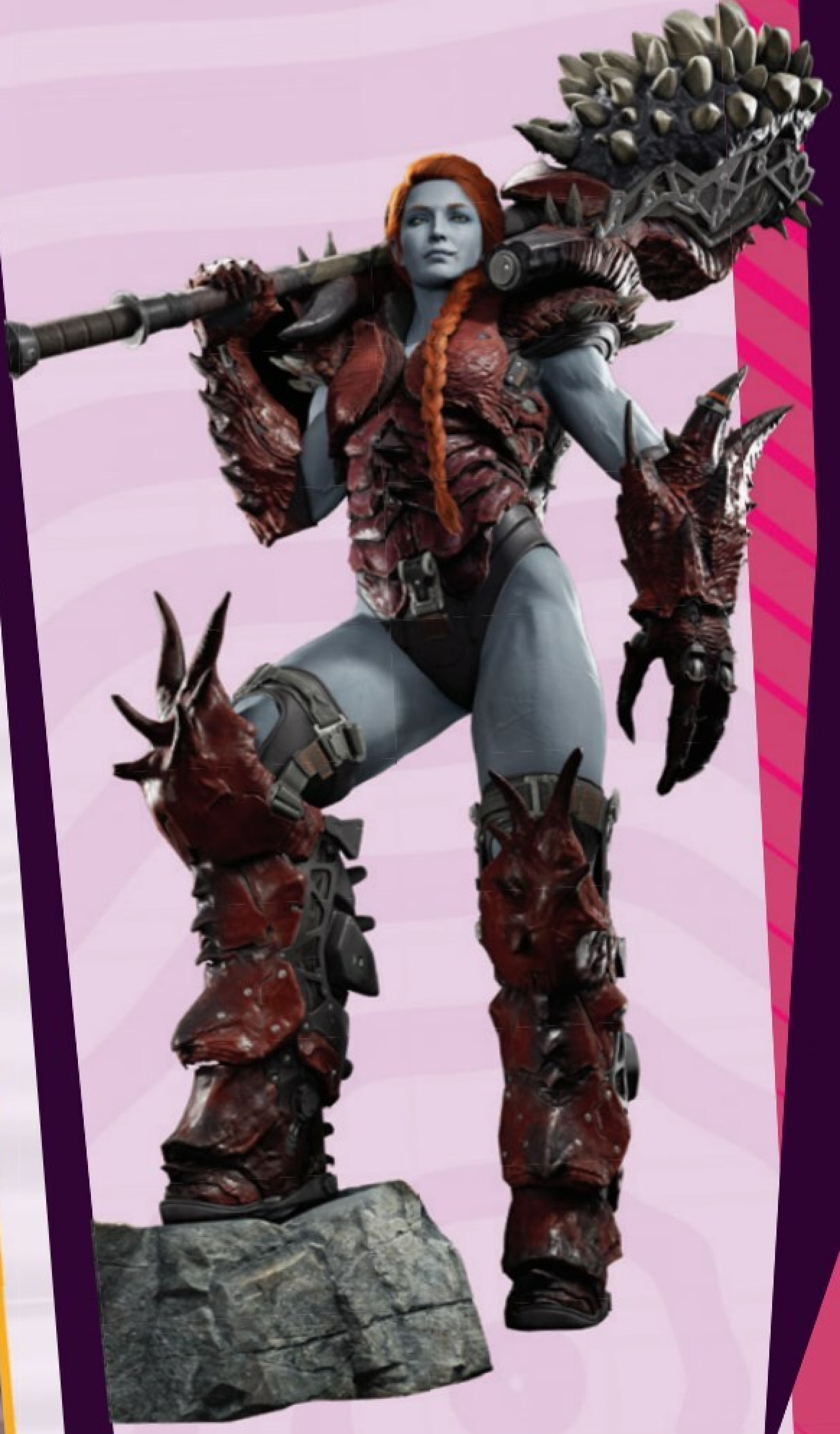
In one section within my demo, Drax thinks removing all his clothing will help them sneak past some guards. Gamora tries to stop him by saying "keep your pants on," but Peter counters her and thinks a naked Drax could be the perfect distraction.

In another moment when the Guardians are exploring hostile alien terrain on the planet Seknarf Nine, Peter says they are getting close to Lady Hellbender's castle. Drax quickly corrects Peter, saying, "That's not a castle. It's an impregnable fortress."

Rocket asks how the group could impregnate it, and Gamora jokingly fires back, "Ask Peter!"

Whether the group is sitting on their ship together or wandering the wilds on a distant planet, they are constantly bantering, and those conversations often go off of the rails, leading to quick quips, frustration, and usually a comedic outcome. Eidos-Montréal keeps the team together as often as possible. When you are walking down a path as Star-Lord, you are often flanked by your entire crew, some of them breaking off to examine the environment, highlight points of interest, and maybe even trigger the next fight or scripted sequence. Your comrades are even aware of what Peter is looking at and will sometimes make comments that line up with what what's on screen. These observations are optional, such as one occurring right from the outset of play.

The Guardians land their ship, the *Milano*, in a quarantine zone of an unknown location, which looks like it recently saw a battle. Giant hunks of starship debris are scattered across the star-filled cosmos. All of these metal hunks are connected by an alien substance that is vibrant pink in color but appears to be violent in nature as it has thick tendrils stretching from one fuselage to the next. "As you come out of a funnel, there's a piece of debris that you can walk all the way to the end of," says senior gameplay designer Patrick Fortier. "If you look up here, Rocket will be like, 'Oh yeah, that's where we're going.'" In this instance, other teammates groan and voice concerns that you are heading in the wrong direction. All that conversing could be missed if you decide to walk forward instead.



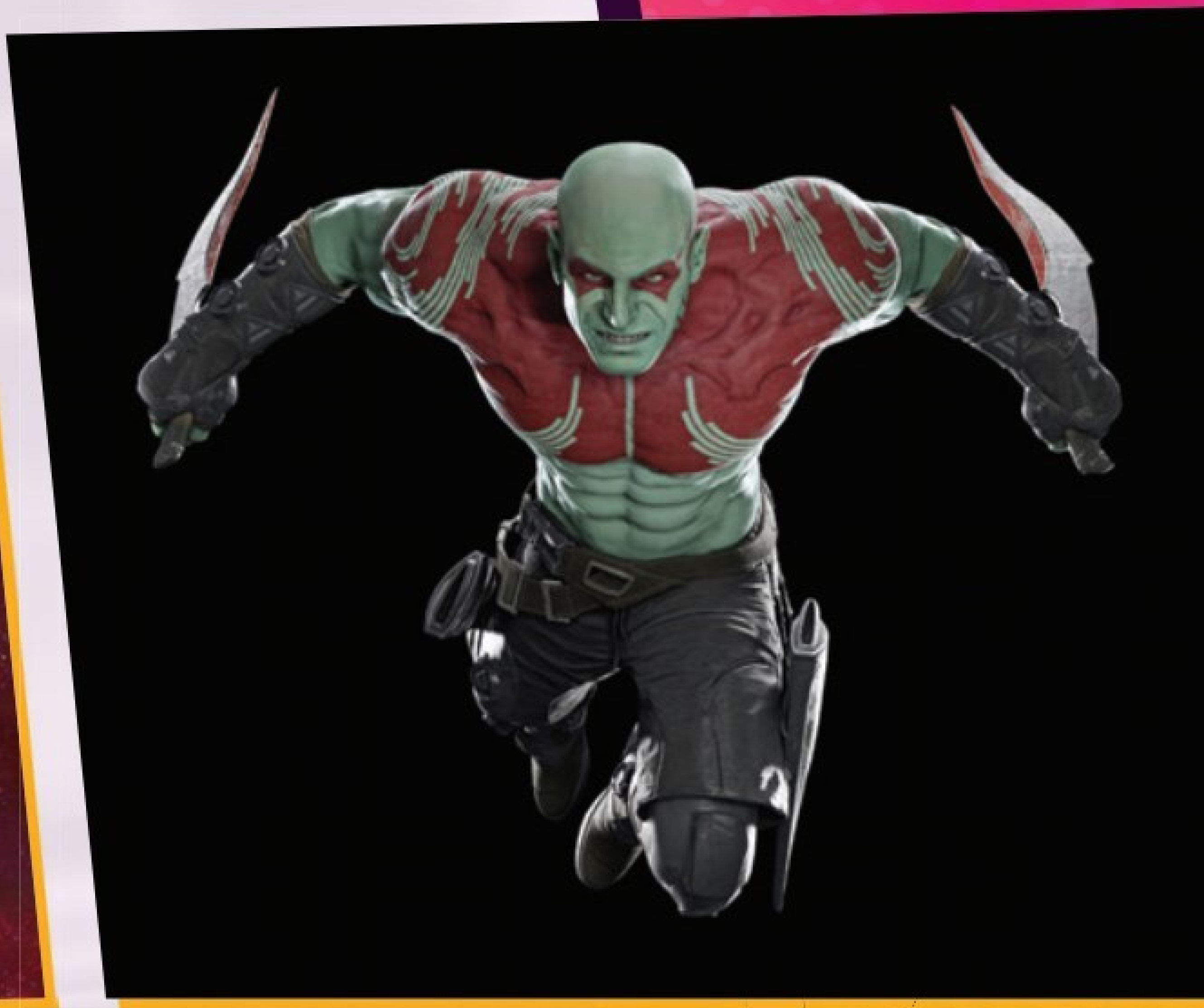
WHO IS LADY HELLBENDER?

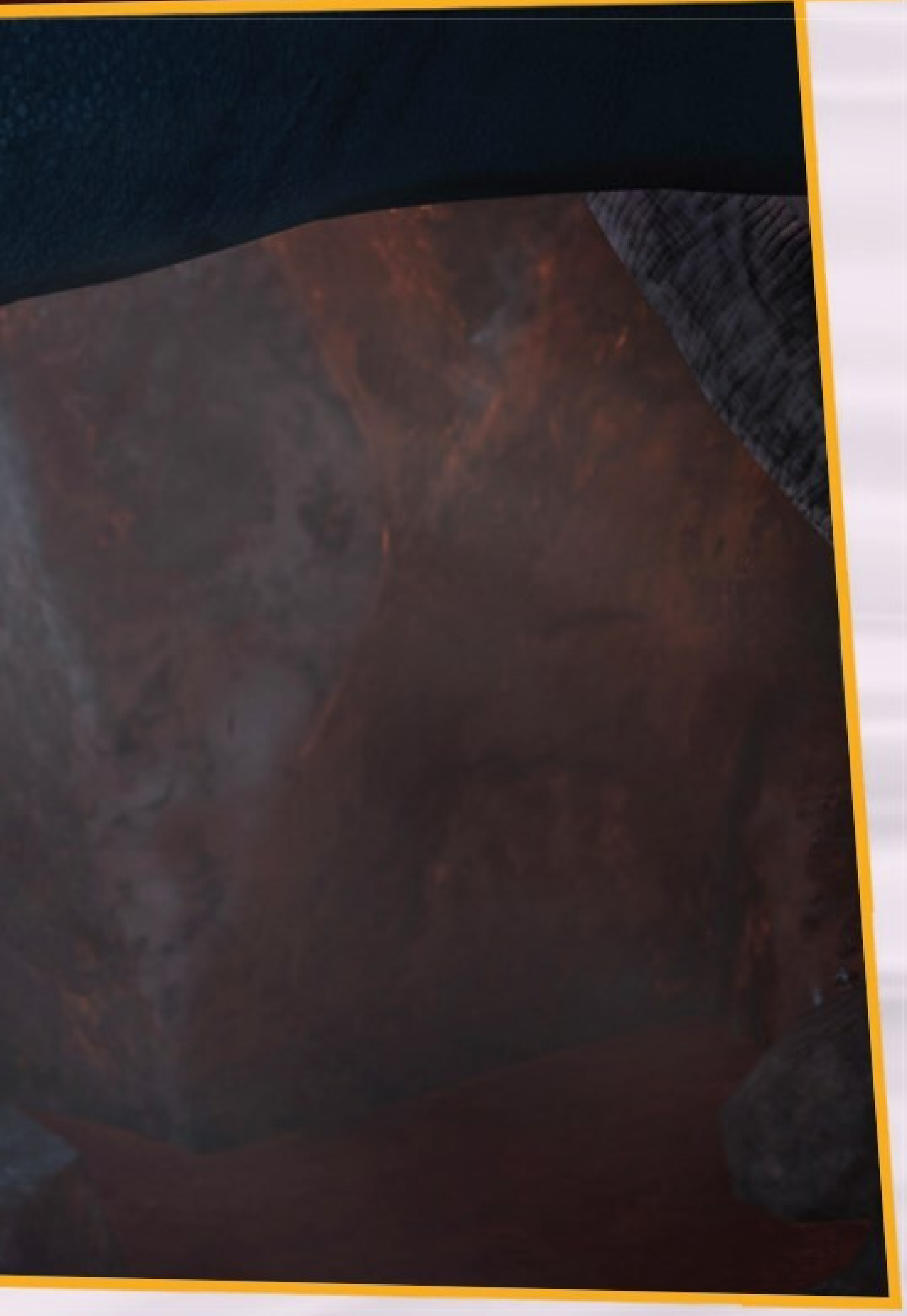
Although Thanos' name is thrown around liberally by Eidos-Montréal, he's only being referenced in the backstory at this point. The focus for the moment is on just one villain: Lady Hellbender. She made her debut in 2016 within the first issue of Frank Cho and Greg Pak's *Totally Awesome Hulk*, and immediately became known as the "monster queen" from her desire to collect rare beasts for her sanctuary on Seknarf Nine.

We don't know much about her origin story or motivations within Eidos-Montréal's game, but she clearly still has an eye for rare monsters, and the Guardians may have just handed her the prize of her collection. In the comics, her real name is Marguerite Hellbender. When she makes appearances, she always shows us she has superhuman strength, is proficient with a sword, and will do anything to get the creatures of her desire.

CAMEOS AND SECRETS GALORE!

As the Guardians rip across the cosmos and visit different planets, they'll run into several familiar faces for fans of Marvel's work. We know Mantis is one of those characters. Mary DeMarle, the project's senior narrative director, says she had the most fun writing Mantis of any character in the game. Several Eidos-Montréal staffers said the game is loaded with fan service, Easter eggs, and characters that should get fans talking.





CHOICES ABOUND

Eidos-Montréal doesn't want to give away much of the plot, but did show a number of instances where the player makes choices to either move the narrative in a different direction or determine what one of the Guardians will do next. Some of the decisions you make alter specific sequences and affect your standing with your teammates. Your choices reverberate throughout the entire story arc.

In one moment where the Guardians need to find a way across a chasm on Seknarf Nine, Drax suggests he throw Rocket across the gap so he can activate a switch that will extend a bridge for the rest of the team. It seems like a fairly safe option, but Rocket is fuming about the possibility and doesn't want to do it. As Peter, you are prompted to make a choice: Encourage Drax to throw him, or outright stop him to figure out a different solution. In our demo, Peter gives Drax the go ahead, and Rocket is sent flying. The little guy crashes to the ground on the other side of the gap and is livid. A message appears in the top-right corner of the screen, reading, "Rocket is furious that you let Drax throw him."

In this instant, your standing with Rocket has changed for the worse, and will likely lead to a repercussion later, whether it's in a gameplay sequence or conversation. "The decisions you make will have lighthearted to haunting repercussions," Proulx says. "All of the characters are growing as the story progresses. Peter grows from a young man to a leader. As you move forward and the story [unfolds], he trusts his instincts more and becomes more assertive. He can be clumsy, but he has a good heart. He's a really fun character to play, and to mold to our story."

In a different story moment aboard the *Milano*, the team is trying to figure out how to earn more credits. Rocket suggests they sell Gamora's figurines (a collectible in the game), but she doesn't want to part with them. Rocket continues ranting about how she doesn't need them and that she should make sacrifices for the team. She counters with "I'll sacrifice your head." At this point, Peter jumps in and quiets the team, and then gets the choice to field advice from Drax, Groot, or continue listening to Rocket's assault.

In our demo, Peter calls on Groot, who slowly says "I … am … Groot."

Rocket answers him, saying that, "Lady Hellbender only buys monsters, and you are not a monster." Groot suggests he stand in as a prized monster to gain entrance to Hellbender's fortress. Since Rocket is the only being who truly understands what Groot is saying, he always responds to him in a way that fills the team and the player in on what was actually said.

Groot's plan piques Peter's interest, knowing that his team could always break him out after he is sold to the wicked collector. He then spins the idea in a slightly different direction, which again brings about the choice to either sell Groot or sell Rocket. Drax pipes in, saying, "the small, ugly one is clearly the right choice. He's cruel, sadistic, and his soul is filthy and filled with rage."

Gamora thinks it should be Groot. That leaves the choice up to Peter, who in this moment sides with Drax. The team then disembarks and begins their quest to meet Lady Hellbender.

Following this sequence, Dugas tells me that little conversations like this could have a big payoff later. "We'll come back to you, like, 'Remember what you did to me? I'm putting it in your face!' There will be other moments where it's going to be more on a massive scale as to what's going to happen next. It's going to be a bit of everything throughout this journey."

Rosemann, who holds the Guardians in a special place in his heart, echoes this statement, saying it's "everything you want and expect from a Marvel story and Guardians experience. It's rock and roll. It's hilarious."

EXPLORING THE UNKNOWN

When you boot up the game, the title screen shows the Guardians aboard the *Milano*, each relaxing a good six feet from one another. Gamora is looking out the window, appearing to be thinking of something weighing on her mind. Groot is quenching his thirst by drinking from a watering can. Rocket is standing next to the couch, tinkering with a tiny metal object in his little paws. Drax is doing something you wouldn't expect; he's reading a book. And Peter appears to be drowning it all out through his headphones, as he listens to a song on his Walkman.

"You go to the *Milano* quite often," says Dugas. "We call it the home of the Guardians, and this is where some missions finish. They fly away, and you can go and talk to your Guardians and explore the ship itself." This means you can get a firsthand look at all the figures you've collected for Gamora. Peter can also interact with a mirror to admire his looks and use his finger to brush his teeth. Much like the Mass Effect games, the ship is a location that fosters intimate character development. When you're done chatting it up with your team, you can fire up the engines to move on to the next destination. You won't have a say where you go, however. The next stop is always predetermined. Dugas wouldn't reveal if the *Milano* will be controllable at any point yet smiled when I pointed out it appeared to be so in the trailer.

When the Guardians first step foot on Seknarf Nine, they are greeted by the beautiful barrenness of the landscape. They stand at the top of a plateau, grey rocks and a slick path in front of them lead to a peculiar valley filled with large circular platforms, each evenly spaced, almost looking like a pond coated in yellow lily pads. Each platform is roughly 50 feet in circumference, held up by a thin column directly in the center. The platforms number in the hundreds and trail off into the distance where Lady Hellbender's fortress awaits on another platform.

Thick gray storm clouds hover menacingly overhead, periodically shooting down a thin bolt of gold lightning onto the platforms. At the heart of the storm is a giant eye, spinning like it's going to drop a tornado at any second.

At this current time, the rain is light, but has been coming down long enough to make Peter slide down the hill, bringing him closer to the platforms. The team needs cross them to reach the Hellbender, but in this time of decision making, Peter asks his friends if his jacket was damaged by the mud.

Although the environment gives off the impression that it's a sprawling open world, the playable space is confined to a linear path. In all the areas I saw during the demo, movement is handled in a similar fashion to Naughty Dog's Uncharted games, with defined spaces for exploration and dynamic traversal, and others used for combat.

The Guardians successfully leap to the first platform, only to learn its base is unstable and their added weight makes it collapse. The large disc shifts to the side, and the team, as mightily as they struggle, become victims to gravity and tumble a good 30 feet to the ground. Within seconds of getting to their feet and dusting themselves off, a creature joins them that is truly alien: a red gelatinous cube that slithers out of a tube and drops to their feet. It's relatively small, standing no higher than Groot's waist, but has no ambition to make peaceful first contact. The cube shifts and contorts in violent ways, revealing what appears to be shapable metal that can be used to stab and poke at the Guardians, almost looking like an agitated cube of Jell-O swinging a sword.

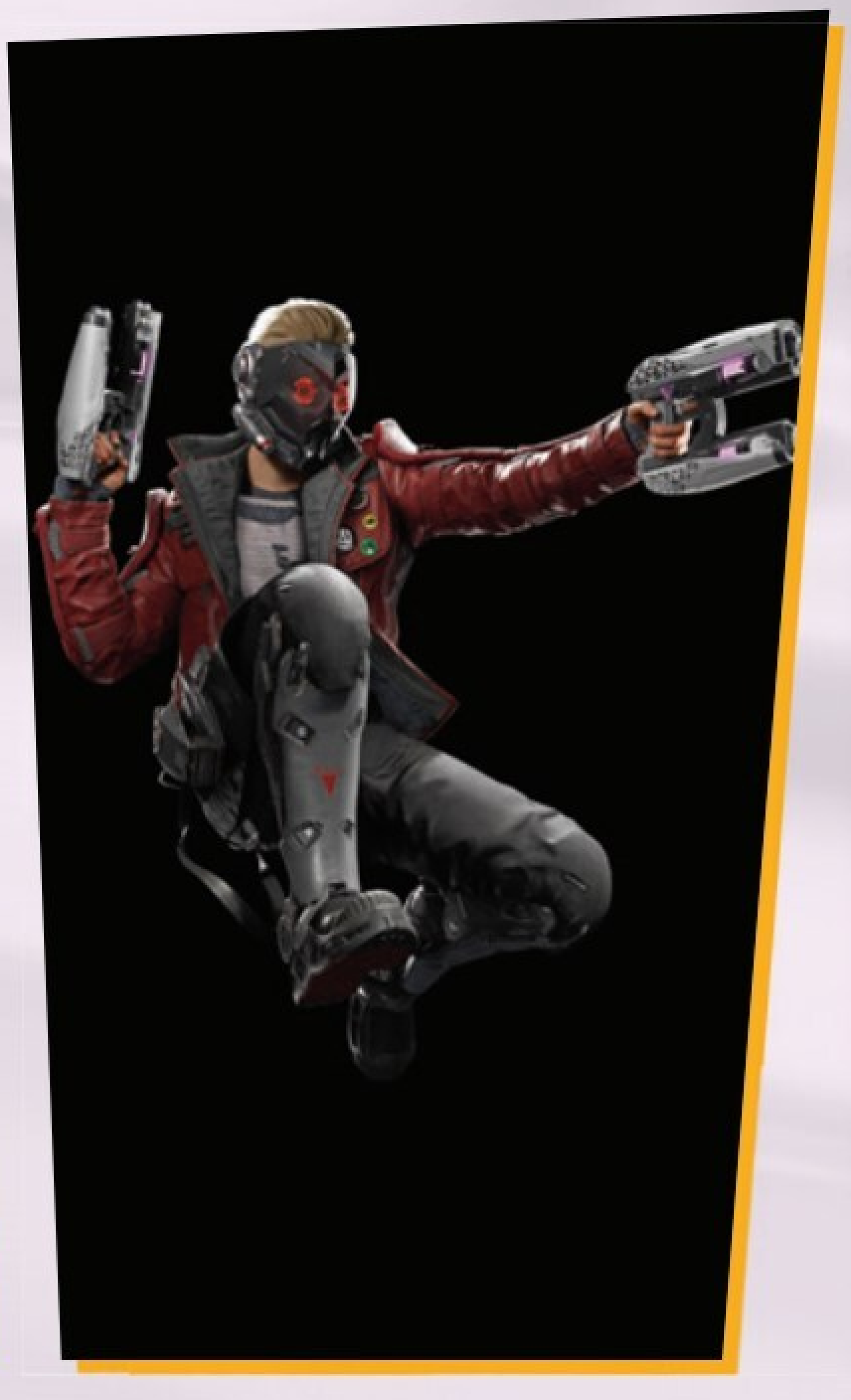
GIVE THEM HELL!

The oddly shaped adversary sends the Guardians into combat positioning, their defined characteristics placing them where you would expect on the battlefield. Drax sprints forward in a rage with blades drawn. Gamora isn't far behind but takes more of a cautious and stealthy approach. Groot is in a similar camp, only he has no intent of getting close, and instead uses his tree-like abilities from mid-range. Star-Lord and Rocket sit on the periphery, using their firearms to deal damage from safe distances.

The numerous battles I see all have a circular arena-like quality to them. The battleground is fairly small, which makes for intimate and chaotic conflicts with five

Guardians sometimes taking on a handful of enemies. With Peter circle-strafing or jetting across the battle, keeping track of where each character is will be tricky, but he can lock onto specific targets to keep them framed, which provides a nice window into what your teammates may be doing against that particular foe.

Star-Lord's firearms are potent from the outset of play but can be equipped with different types of elemental ammo gained as the narrative unfolds. By the end of the game, you'll have all of them unlocked. "Enemies have different weaknesses, and some are vulnerable to [specific elemental ammo] like lightning," says Fortier. "Wind is super useful against snipers. Before you get that ammo, you have to face them, and you feel the frustration of battling them." When the wind ammo is procured, it can be used to pull the snipers toward Peter, thus limiting their timing and range. The different ammo types can also be used for environmental puzzles and traversal, such as being able to use wind to pull a blockage down.



NEW-GEN DIFFERENCES

The PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X, and PC versions deliver the performance boosts new-gen adopters have come to expect. You can either play the game in 4K with a steady framerate of 30 frames-per-second, or switch to performance mode to get 55 to 60 frames-per-second in 1080p. Eidos-Montréal is also enhancing these versions with additional art assets like softer shadows, better reflections and rendering, and more.

Peter is best at a distance but can also get in close if he wants to; a tap of the melee button will send out a punch. Hitting that button repeatedly creates combo strings. The dash move used mostly for evasion can also be rolled in to create a sliding attack. If Peter is airborne, he performs a slam maneuver. The close quarters play for Peter isn't deep but does provide a nice variety of acrobatic attacks, such as a rising uppercut.

Since you only control one character, all the other teammates' basic actions are controlled by A.I. They attack plenty on their own, but won't win battles for you – meaning you can't go hide in a corner and expect them to mop up the vermin for you. You must take control of them for a split second to have them execute the moves that truly deal damage that matters.

To issue these commands, the player must press and hold the Guardian button (L1 on PlayStation 5) and then the assigned face button for the teammate of their choice. Groot is square, Drax is circle, Gamora is triangle, and Rocket is X. If you pick Groot, the characters' faces disappear from the buttons and are replaced with four ability icons. These powerful abilities are unlocked over time as enemies are defeated and experience points and levels are earned. Eidos-Montréal doesn't want to overwhelm the player with RPG systems but does offer a progression path that empowers each of the Guardians in various ways, such as earning new abilities and unlocking different suits (some of which are reserved as preorder bonuses).

In terms of the roles each Guardian plays, Rocket is described as crowd management. He can take on enemies in the sky and at a range and can mess with them in various ways. His ultimate attack is a barrage that makes his gun comically grow with what appears to be dozens of barrels, rockets, and other armaments pointed in the direction of the enemy; he unleashes hell upon them in one powerful blast. Groot is a more defensive character who attacks with his arms and can transform them into wooded shields that Peter and other Guardians can duck behind. He can also send out branches to entangle and immobilize enemies. Larger enemies can break free of this hold, but over time the player can make that ability more durable to keep these troublesome foes at bay.

"Groot and Rocket are best buddies, so we wanted to translate that to combat as well," says Fortier. "They fight together a lot of times. Rocket will climb onto Groot and hold on as he's shooting away."

Drax is a true tank on the battlefield, but can also stagger foes and make them vulnerable to the larger group. He can take on multiple foes at once and draw enemy attention away from the team. When you feel all attention is turned toward Peter or a Guardian who is on the brink of death, Drax can step up and draw fire his way.

"Gamora is our closer," adds Fortier. "She's the one that inflicts the most damage – the single most damage with the blade. She does killing blows. Her abilities are always with the blade."

When any ability is used, it enters a cooldown timer before it can be unleashed again. Standard abilities take roughly 15 seconds to cool down, and the mega ability is said to be about double that.

Many of the abilities work in unison with other Guardians, so the player will need to experiment to see what combinations work best against specific enemies, such as Drax being able to pin down a wild blue space cat and Gamora sliding in for a fierce sword strike. "It feels like you're constantly using the powers of your Guardians," says Dugas. "They are constantly with you, and you're maximizing all of the opportunities."

Peter's mega attack pauses combat briefly. He puts his headphones on, raises his hand high into the sky like John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, and hits play on his Walkman. A licensed song from the 1980s plays. He then calls the Guardians to his side for something Eidos-Montréal calls a "huddle." They stand together in a circle as Peter gives a speech to lift them up. All the words he uses for this motivational moment are spun out of the song of note. Just picture a bunch of superheroes being lifted by the words of Rick Astley. All the songs are from the 1980s, reflecting Peter's childhood on Earth. Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out for a Hero," and Joan Jett's "Bad Reputation" are a couple of the songs players can expect to hear as they travel the cosmos.

A nice library of licensed songs are in Peter's mixtape, but the overall score accompanying the exploration and combat will be orchestrated. As of this writing, Eidos-Montréal hopes to record it at the legendary Abbey Road Studios in London, England.

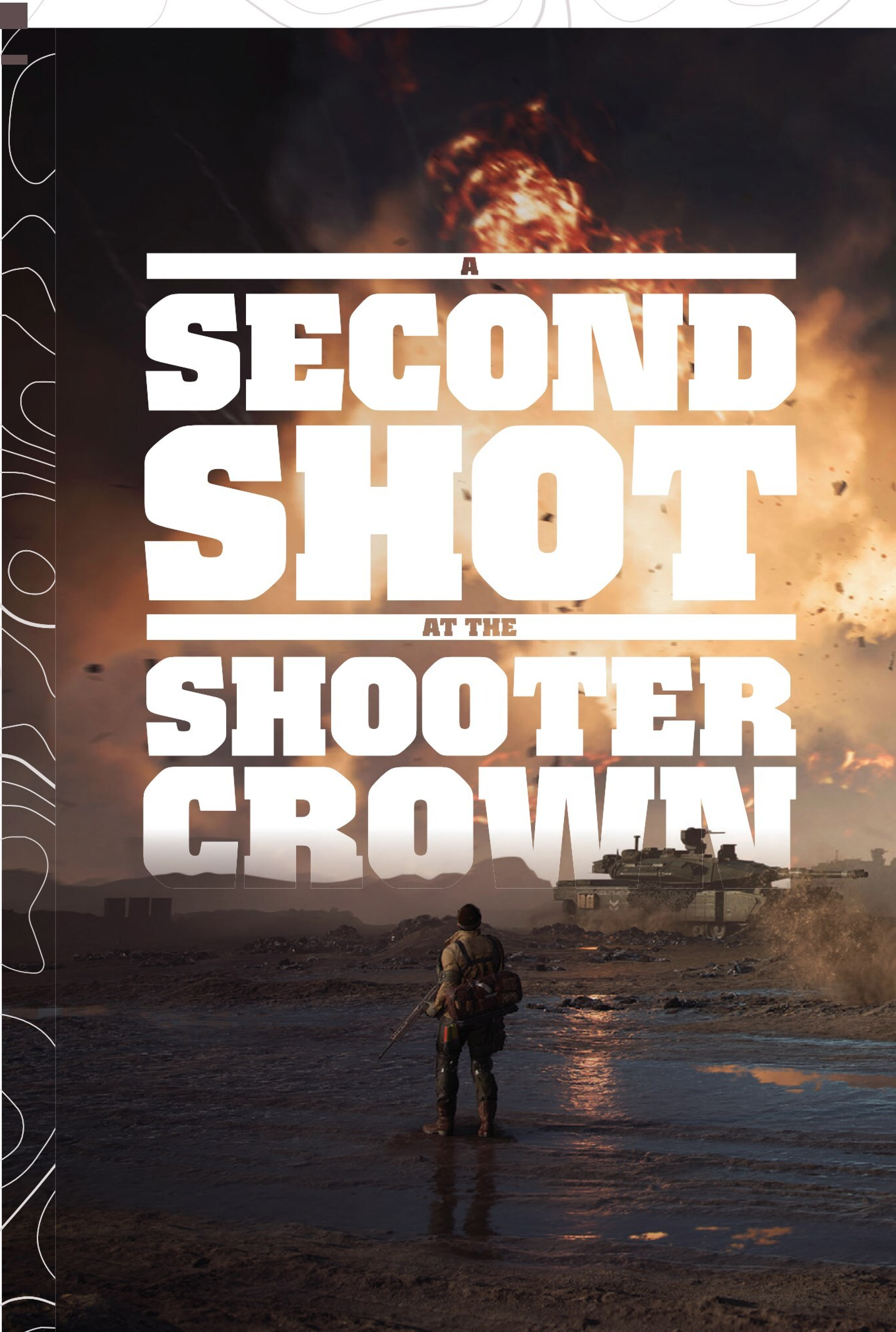
A PROMISING DEBUT

After playing through Marvel's Spider-Man in 2018, I daydreamed about other iconic Marvel heroes getting the same treatment, and there eventually being just as many superhero games as movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. That dream is slowly becoming a reality. Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy makes a strong first impression with a vision that pinpoints exactly what makes this superhero team special. It's about the Guardians helping each other find their places in the galaxy, while doubling as a showcase of what they are capable of as heroes. One look at them standing shoulder to shoulder immediately brings about thoughts of their great comics and films, and made me want to see more of their game in action.

Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy has a shot at being this year's Spider-Man, not just from the heroes being treated with respect, but as being the next big single-player experience that pounds out excitement in its own unique way. The good news is we don't have long to wait to get our hands on this wild galactic experience. Eidos-Montréal and Square Enix have kept it under wraps for years, and it's now just four months away with an October 26 release date. ◆

Want to learn more about Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy? Head to GameInformer.com/GotG for additional previews, exclusive interviews, and more!

A SECOND SHOT AT THE SHOOTER CROWN



» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
128-Player Online Shooter (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC), 64-Player Online Shooter (PS4, Xbox One)

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
DICE

» Release
October 22

BATTLEFIELD 2042 is the next evolutionary step for the famed FPS franchise

by LIANA RUPPERT

S

Sure, taking to battle in a fast-paced shooter is fun and all, but have you ever weaponized a tornado? The answer is probably no, but with Battlefield 2042 you can let your dreams become realities. The next step for the Battlefield franchise uses cutting-edge technology and new generational hardware to push the sky to the limit. While many games boast that, Battlefield 2042 looks to truly live up to that promise. From a way higher player count to a perfect blend of new and familiar, the upcoming first-person shooter aims to take back the crown within the multiplayer space.

Battlefield 2042 sets the stage in the near future, in a time ravaged by the most profound refugee crisis known to man. Players assume the role of a Non-Patriated, or Non-Pat for short. Non-Pats are farmers, engineers, soldiers – they are survivors of the recent upheaval – fighters that don't fight for a flag. They fight for the future of the known world.

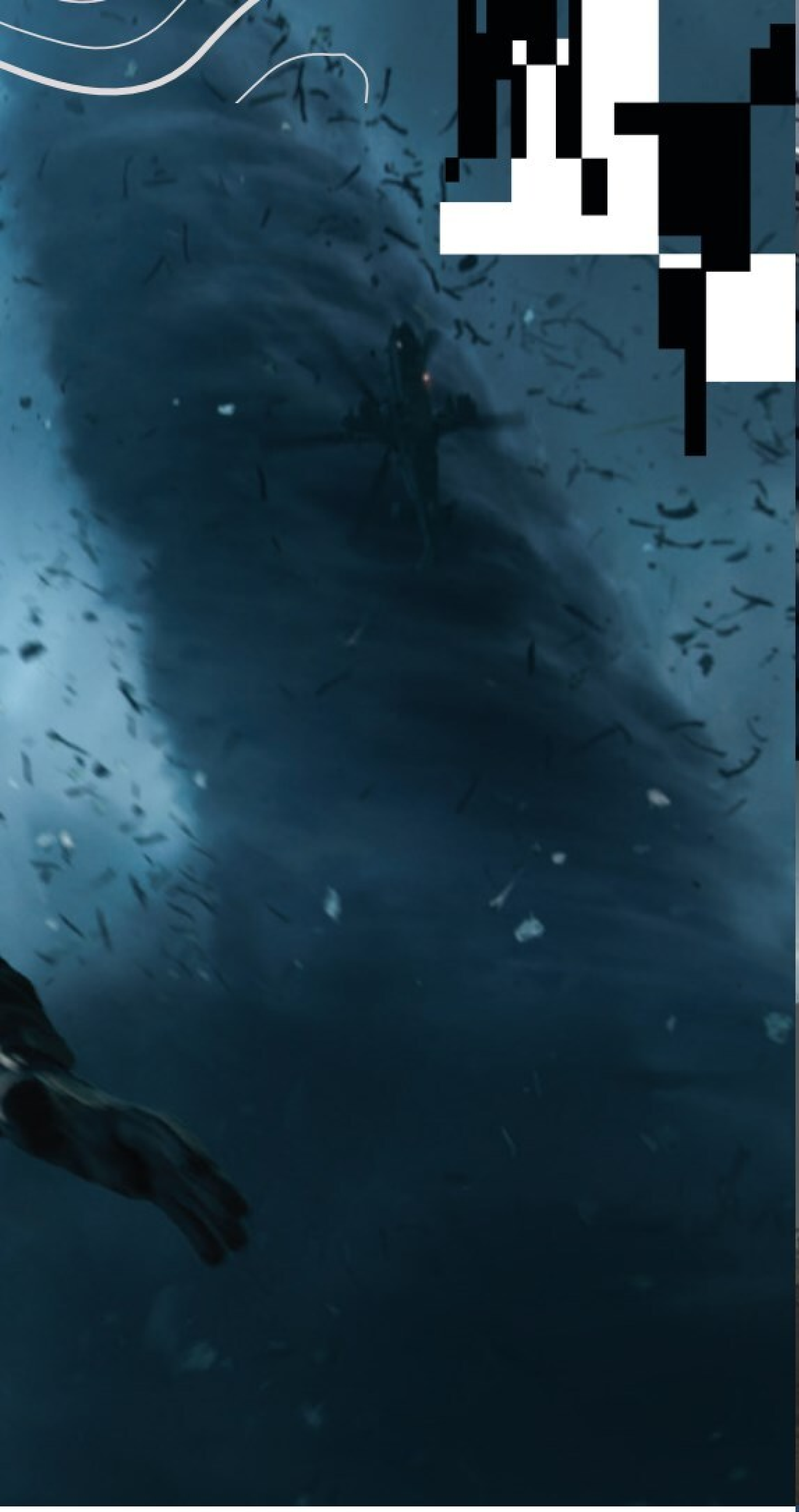
The latest Battlefield eschews the usual single-player versus multiplayer component, and instead offers players a hybrid experience. When I first learned there was no single-player, I felt disappointed, but the more I learned about 2042, the more I understood the vision of this new game. On the online side of the equation, developer DICE is pushing this shooter to the limit by upping the player count to 128 on PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X, and PC. PS4 and Xbox One players are downsized to 64 to preserve the experience, though the studio says that the lower player count will not impact the game's overall style and feel.

With more of a focus on multiplayer, three core experiences are at the heart of Battlefield 2042. There's All-Out Warfare, the next generation of fan favorites Conquest and Breakthrough. Paired with the largest maps in the history of the Battlefield franchise, All-Out Warfare is designed to be freeing, intense, and chaotic. That chaos is ramped up to 11 by dynamic weather changes, evolving world events, and, of course, tornadoes.

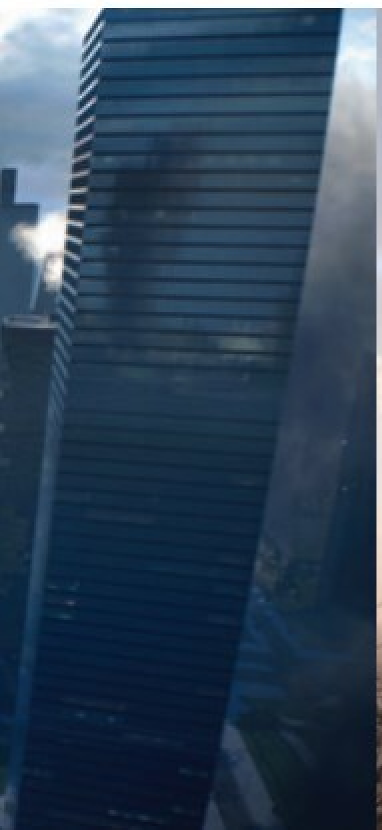
Tornadoes, dust storms, and more ravage the maps while players battle it out. DICE tells us that players can choose to either stay out of a tornado's path or harness its power to gain the advantage. No matter which way you spin it, taking out a sniper by using a giant natural disaster? That's an epic opportunity.

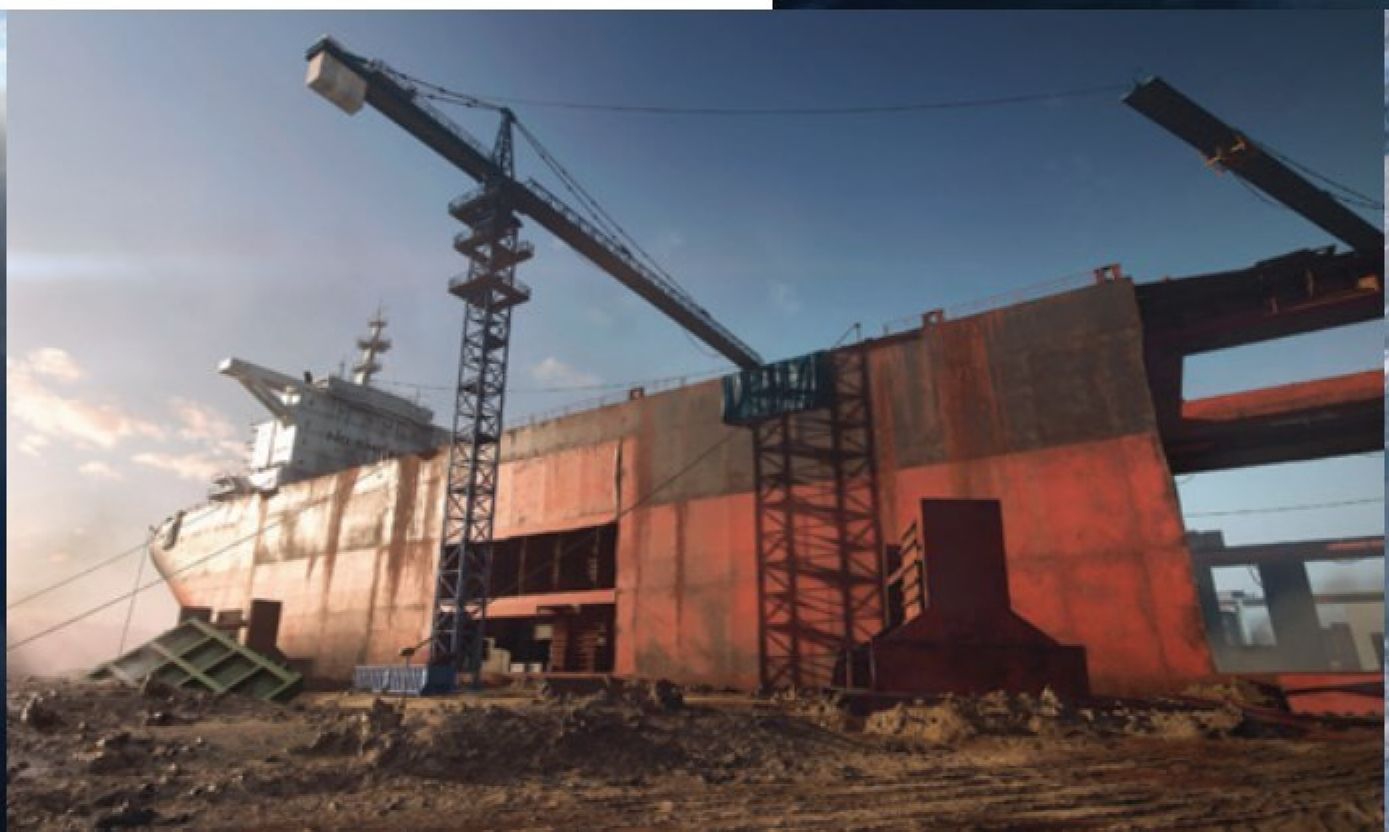
The second multiplayer experience is Hazard Zone. This mode is all about high-stakes and communicating with your squad. Hazard Zone is a more modernized take on the Battlefield experience and stands on its own, completely different from that of All-Out Warfare.

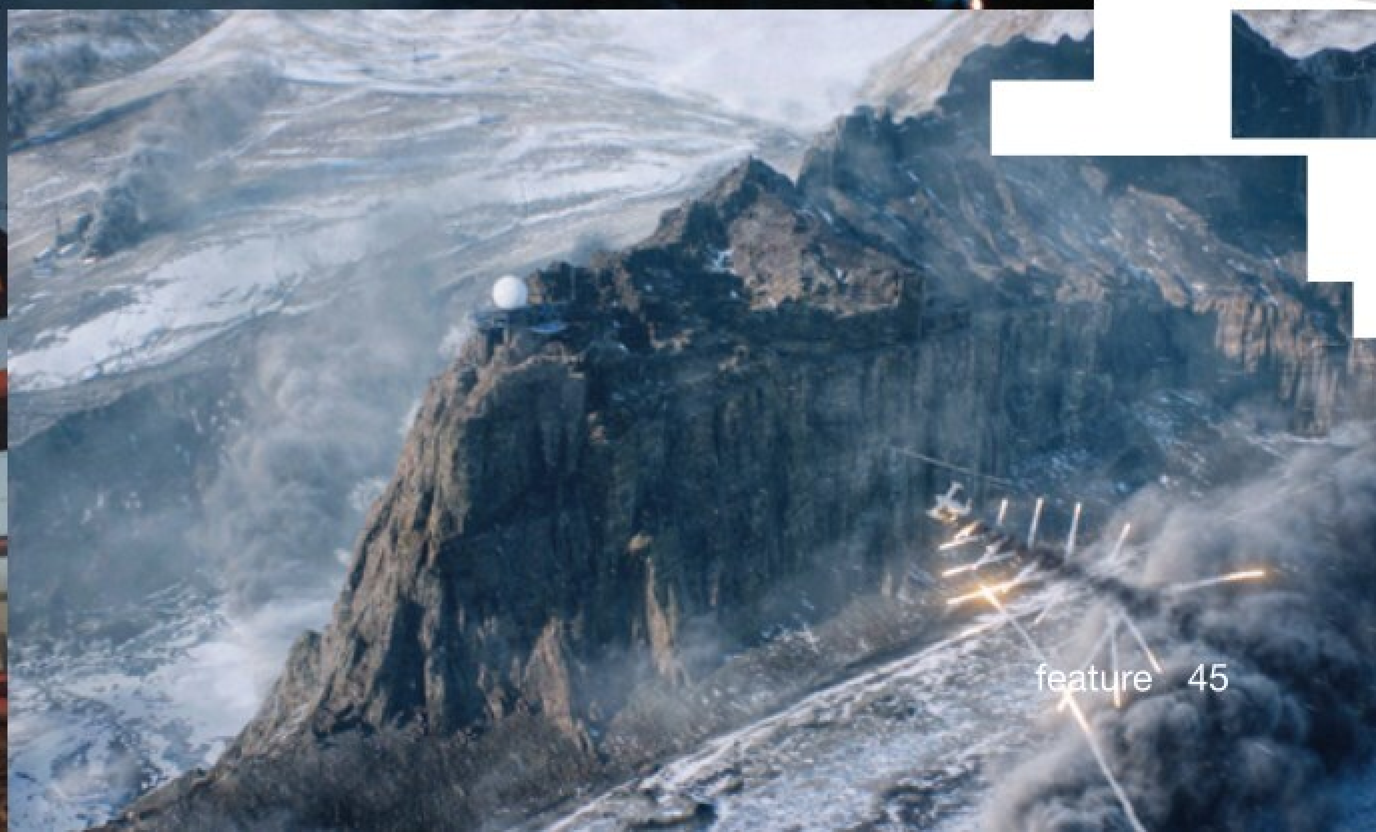
The final aspect of the multiplayer experience is still a secret, something DICE will reveal more about this July. That being said, the studio did tease that longtime Battlefield fans will feel "right at home."

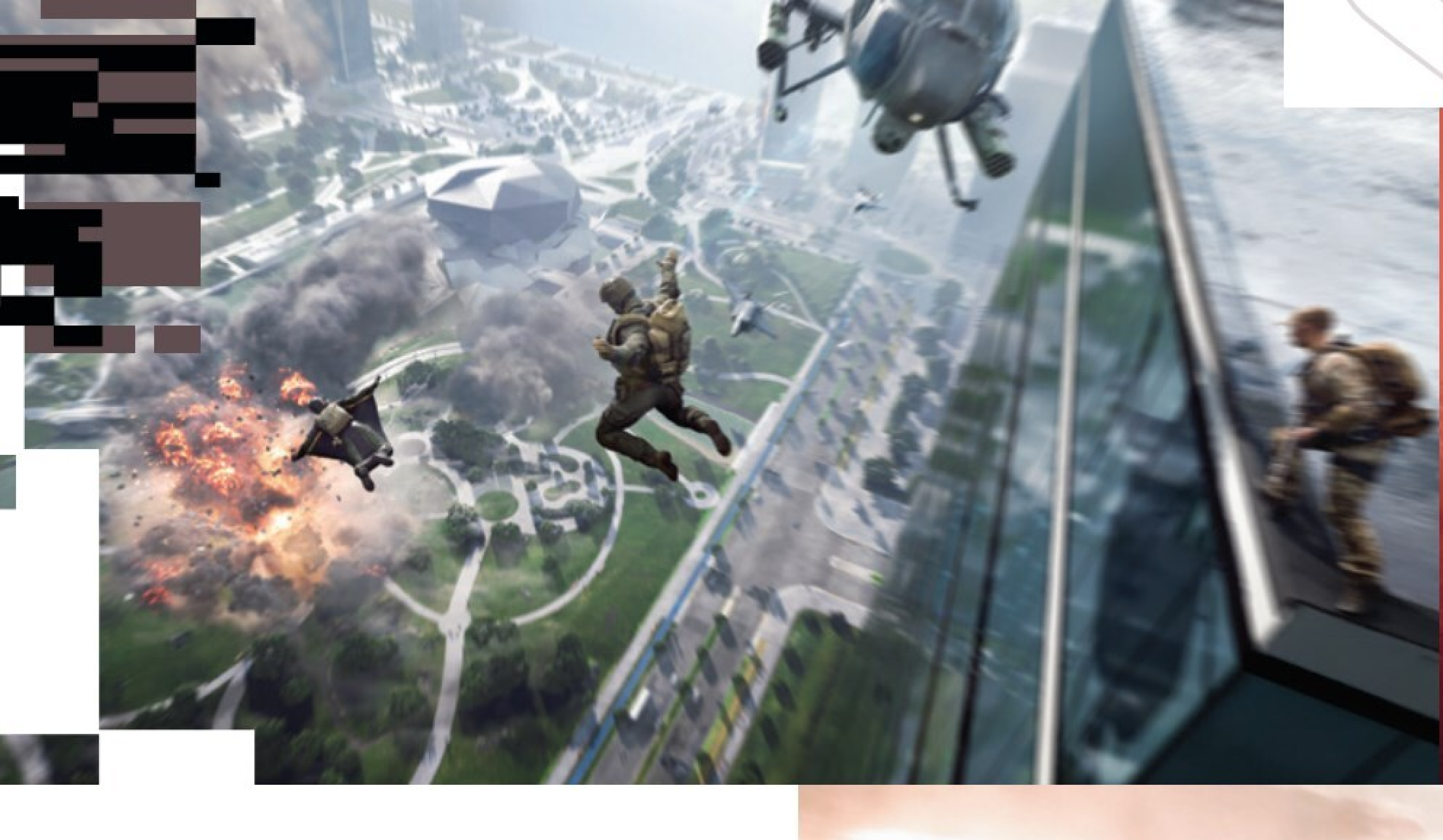


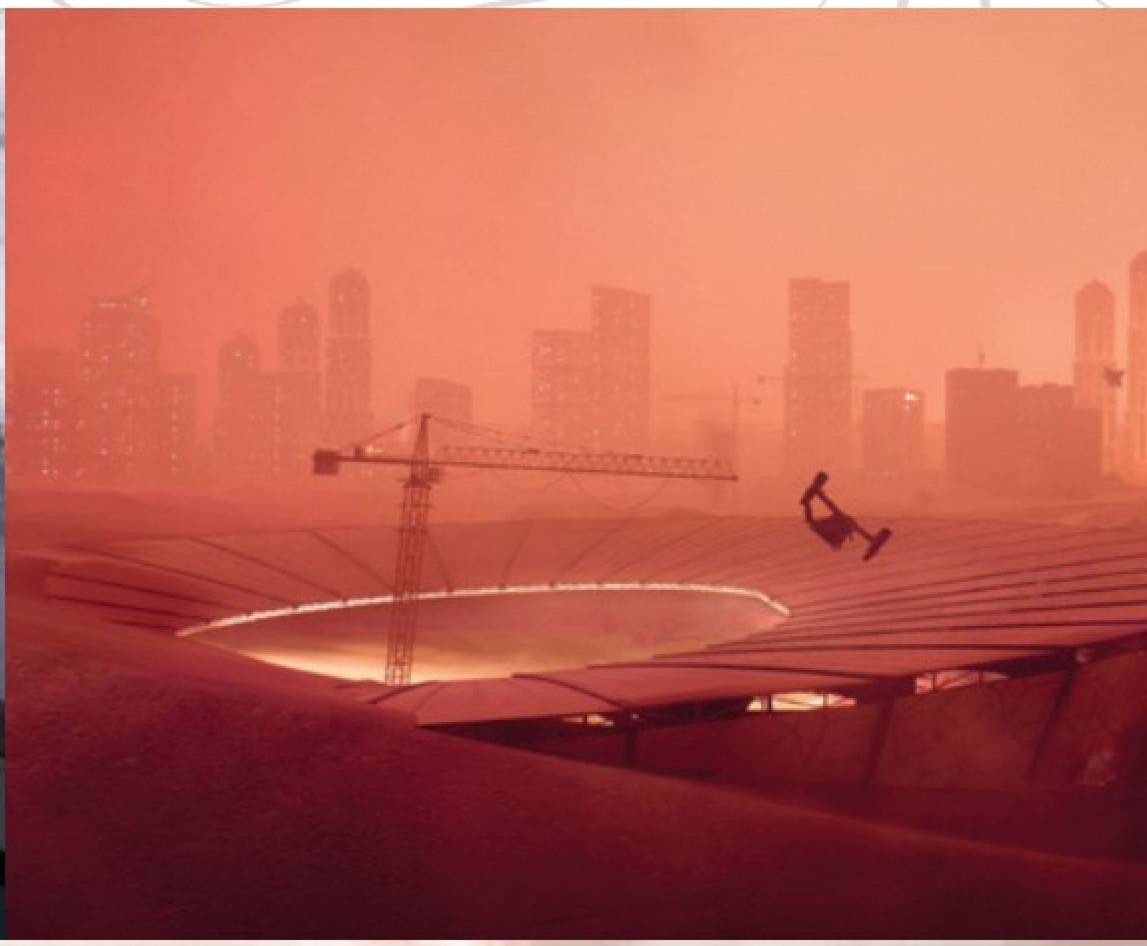
With the largest maps to-date, I couldn't wait to learn more about the different locations to tackle. There's Kaleidoscope in North Korea, where the objective centers around a disinformation hub. Set in Singapore, Manifest will challenge even the most strategic of players when supply lines are threatened. Orbital is set within French Guiana with a controversial rocket launch site taking center stage. Discarded is in India with nuclear assets on the line. Renewal is in Egypt where players must survive dangerous dust storms and each other. Hourglass is set in Qatar with a focus on a rogue shipping convoy. And finally, there's Breakaway. This map is set in Antarctica, and pits nature versus military when a conflict over oil and gas reaches a breaking point.











Each map is bigger than anything Battlefield players have seen before, both in terms of linear scope and verticality. With more ways to conquer the terrain of Battlefield 2042 with gear, vehicles, and updated classes, there is no shortage of experiences to be had for those looking for the ultimate FPS challenge.

For those worried about playing with others with the faded single-player experience, don't be. DICE has set up a way for those that want to take part in the latest Battlefield to do just that without having to team up with strangers; all game modes and maps will be available to play against A.I. instead of real people. Dealer's choice, you decide.

With new maps come new Specialists. Battlefield 2042 offers a new type of playable soldier inspired by the more traditional classes this series is known to have. Each one has their own Specialist Trait and Specialty, as well as fully customizable loadouts. The best part? While the Traits are locked, there is no loadout cutoff. Play who you want with the gear you want, no limits.

Battlefield 2042 will offer 10 Specialists at launch with more coming later. What has me the most excited, however, is the special attention the studio gave the Support class. Players can now shoot allies to heal and even revive them, allowing for more strategic heals when under fire. Play as Maria Falck to use this healing gun as a Combat Surgeon or Pyotr Guskowvsky to get sentry-happy when using that engineer background to dominate the battlefield. Or, say to heck with the both of them and go Casper with a handy dandy drone. Whatever you choose, there is a benefit to each pick. Each class and each Specialist have something special to offer. Unique traits, unique skills, and unique looks make the world of 2042 more immersive.

The evolution of playable characters paired with the new wheel of customization allows players to modify their loadout while mid-firefight, making for a tailored multiplayer experience unlike anything Battlefield has ever done before. Prefer to play as sniper but you've found yourself in close quarters pinned down? Toggle on that customization wheel and choose a different weapon, different attachments, and then resume gunning to take that win. This is called the Plus System and it's every bit as flexible as it sounds.

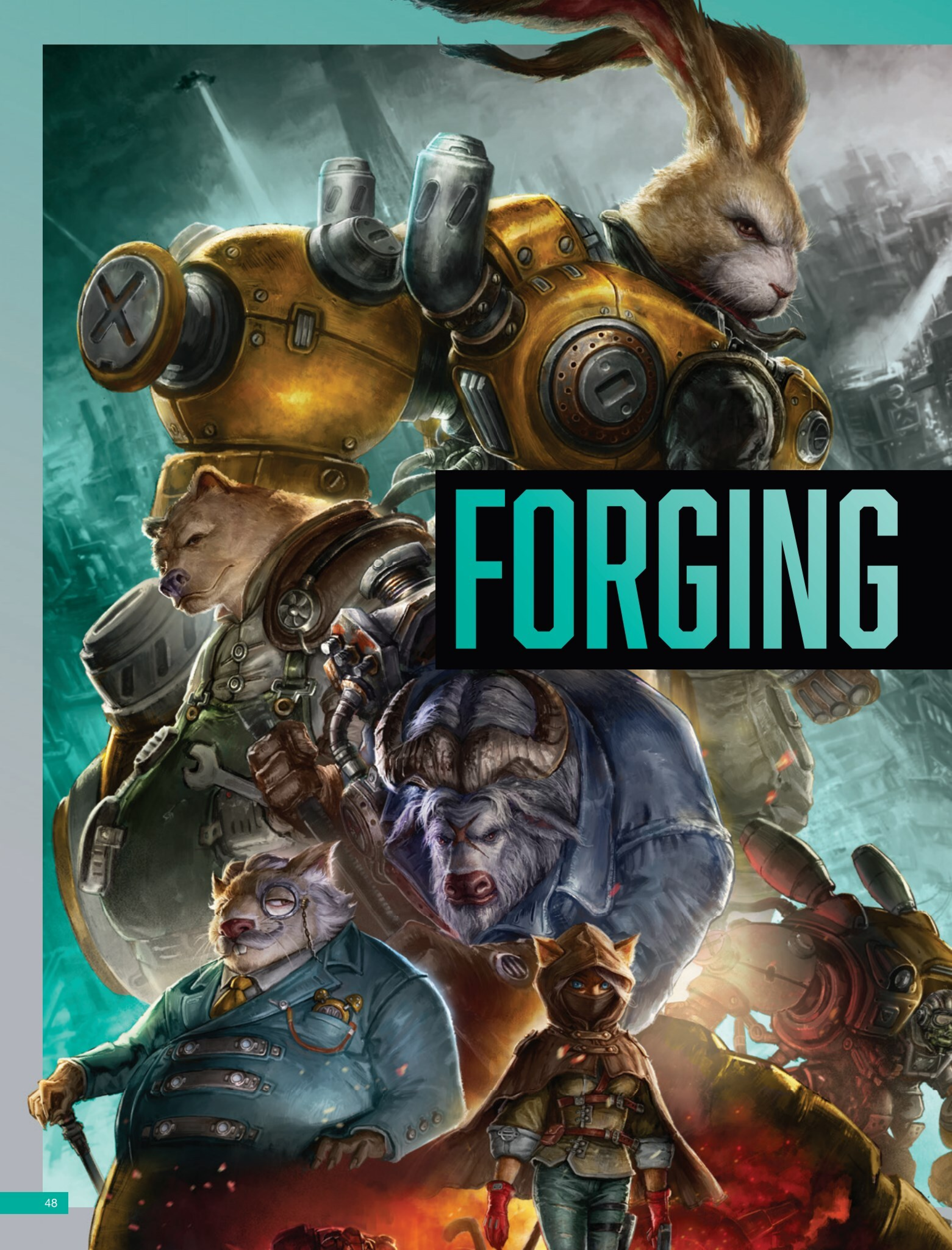
With great weapons and classes comes awesome new vehicles. Battlefield is no stranger to causing some serious mayhem via vehicular destruction, and 2042 continues that tradition. This sandbox experience is completely modernized, and that applies to the various wheelage players can utilize to their advantage. Use a call-in tablet to transport a vehicle to you while collaborating with your team to maximize each type's usage. Gunner vehicles, mine drops – you name it. Why just mow somebody down when you can drop a line of mines on the way instead?

This is an online game, and it is live-service. Unlike Call of Duty, however, DICE isn't interested in locking playable content behind paywalls and it isn't interested in restricting maps due to the player's platform of choice. While a free and premium version of the Battle Pass will be available, the premium version is purely for cosmetics. No operators, no maps, and no modes will be locked behind the purchasable version of this player option. If you're like me and like having nifty-looking Specialists, then premium might be the way to go. However, it won't be required to enjoy the game as it's meant to be enjoyed, which is an issue with other online titles like Call of Duty and Destiny 2.

Battlefield 2042 truly feels like a beautiful comeback and the natural next step for the DICE franchise. Set in the future – but not

the distant future – 2042 looks exciting and forward-thinking. It looks intuitive, massive, and new. This new experience favors strategy, and while the loss of single-player is disappointing, that decision has challenged the team to be creative in how to supplement that story. With lore drops and Specialists that have an actual tale to tell, this hybrid experience doesn't offer half of an experience, it offers a new experience. And let's be real, after Battlefield 5? This series needs a revamp.

Where it goes next from here remains to be seen, but everything I've seen thus far has me more than a little excited to parachute my way in and cause some serious chaos. ◈



FORGING

A sprawling journey through a dystopian dieselpunk setting featuring a motley assortment of badass mechs and adorable animals, **F.I.S.T.: Forged In Shadow Torch** aims to captivate players with powerful visuals and customizable combat.

AN ADVENTURE

» PLATFORM
PS5 • PS4 • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
bilibili Game

» DEVELOPER
TiGames

» RELEASE
2021

by
DANIEL TACK

F.I.S.T.: Forged In Shadow Torch takes place in an oppressive, authoritarian machine-world ruled by robotic monstrosities bent on observation, dominance, and rule. By the time you step into the role of rabbit protagonist Rayton, the great war for the city has already been fought, and the mecha-lords hold sway over the massive torch city. While Rayton was previously dismissive of the realities that slowly continued to ebb away at his freedoms, the arrest of his friend brings back old wounds – and renewed aggression toward the forces that pushed the great animal kingdom into hiding and ruin. Rayton's arrested friend is a huge bear, and along the journey other cute little critters will aid you against the Machine Legion such as a red panda, a rodent, and more. It's a classic tale of nature versus technology, with a scrappy bunny at the helm. F.I.S.T. is an underdog story if there ever was one, and it appropriately begins … with a fist.

Before you begin your Metroid-inspired journey through side-scrolling areas, Rayton needs a weapon. While Rayton unlocks various tools, abilities, and armaments during his adventure, his first pickup packs a punch. It's a giant mechanical fist that can bash enemies into gears, making it invaluable for both devastating opponents and manipulating the environment. Picking up the gauntlet and smashing my way through my first machines gives me a good sense of the game's flow; it eases you into learning each new ability with generous examples that you can apply later. Shortly after obtaining the gauntlet and crushing my way through a few dirty sidestreets, my first big challenge arises: I need to fly to get where I'm going, and the gauntlet just isn't going to get me there. The game shows me an air vent blasting air into the sky and lets me know that I need the drill to continue, but doesn't really explain anything beyond that. Scouring the city, out-of-the-way doors and tunnels are hidden about. I'm struck by detail in the backdrop of each area, even if it amounts to simple platforming and punching at this stage of the game. For example, a rabbit may quickly shut their window in fear or disgust as you leap up near it on a dirty awning. These quirks, while small, help sell the vision of this once-happy-animal-land turned into a mechanized menagerie. Crawling into a hidden tunnel and digging around a secret room, I discover a green pip. By collecting these, I can add permanent health to my bar, giving me an edge in combat. Blue pips for energy are also available to track down, leading to a larger pool to use powerful abilities with.

But for now, I need to get back to finding that drill. Luckily, I stumble upon another creature willing to teach me a new skill, which allows me to charge up my punch power by holding down the attack button. I can do this while in the air and maneuvering as well, so this ability becomes an incredibly useful skill for jumping around dodging projectiles. This charged-up punch attack gives me my first real way to interact with the environment as well, as I can now punch in certain doors with a juiced-up wallop. In addition, enemies with giant shields get thrown into the mix, making this new power even handier. While these enemies are nearly impenetrable via regular assaults, one powered-up bash destroys their shields for good.

The charge attack proves its value as I face down my first boss, a savage mechanical titan that can fire his fist out like a projectile and then come rushing in to collect it, leading to a potentially game-ending attack if both hits land. While I fall for the trick once, I'm lucky enough to still have two charges in my flask of trusty carrot juice, limited-use, recharge-at-checkpoint healing potions, like those in Dark Souls. Chugging down a few gulps perks Rayton right up, and I charge up a few super punches to bring the boss down. While it also has a dangerous jumping dive attack and a standard telegraphed melee swing, he's simple enough to play around. It's a dangerous fight but this first real enemy has only a few attacks in his arsenal, making him easy to take down after a little observation. Before I continue my quest for the ever-elusive drill, I snag a data disk from the fallen foe.

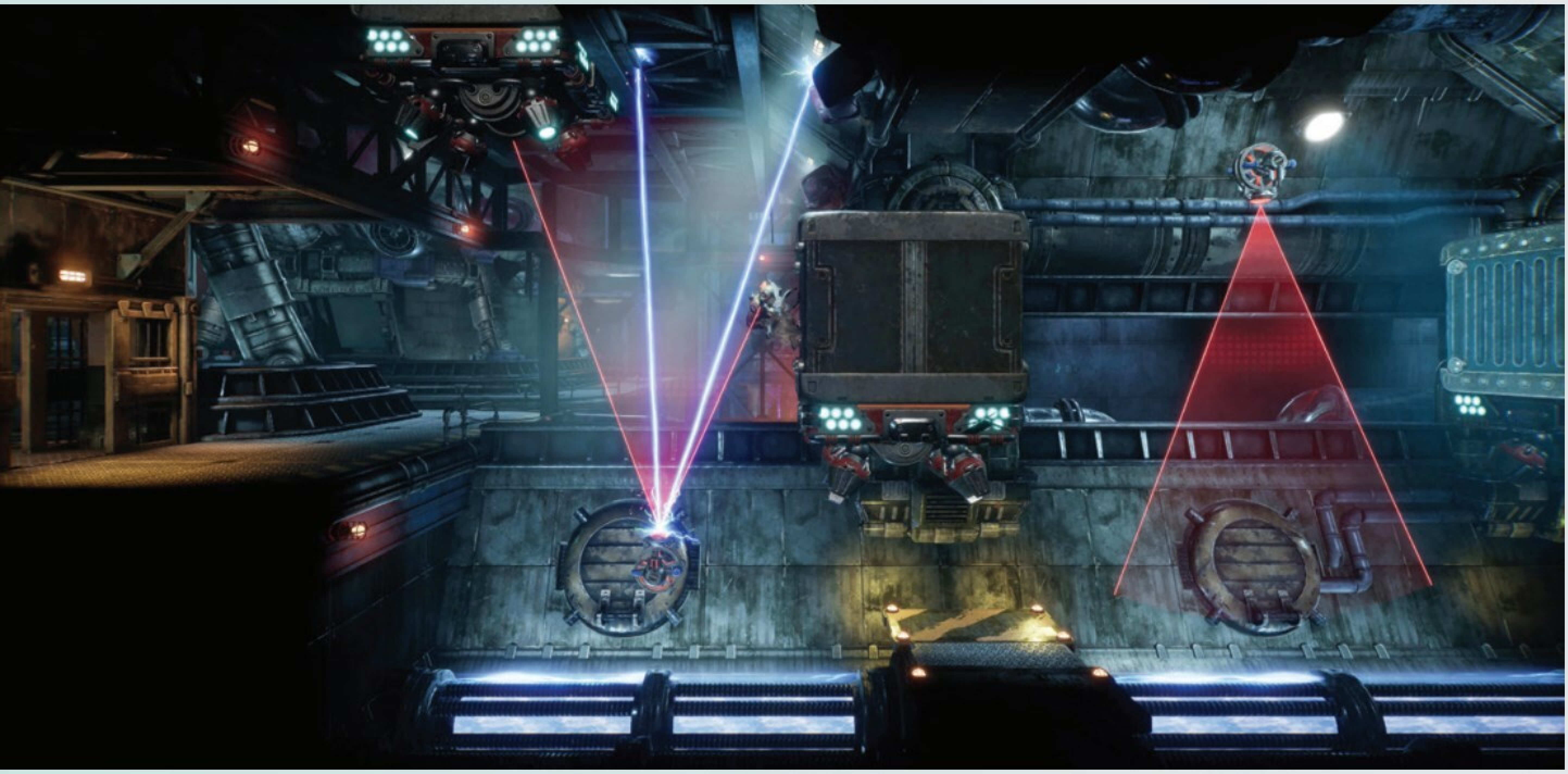
Data disks, which are much harder to obtain than standard currency, can be used to enhance or obtain special abilities at checkpoints. Checkpoints are plentiful around the world; resting at one will return your hit points to max, fill up your stock of carrot juice, and allow you to spend coins and disks on a talent tree that can unlock skills or enhance existing ones. Generally, these trees span out from Rayton's three core weapons: the fist, the drill, and the whip. However, there are some exceptions that allow you to power up non-specific skills, like your execution ability that lets you take out weakened foes for bonuses. Many of these nodes can be unlocked with coins. Coins you get from any common foe, but the disks are rarer finds. In this case, I'm going to unlock a sweet new move, my first that uses the energy (mana) bar and lets me do a rising uppercut into the air with the mecha-fist. Positioned and timed right, it can connect with serious power and even offer some aerial mobility on top.

Armed with this new tech, I continue exploring the world. I locate several powerful upgrades by exploring that allow me to wall-jump and double jump, further expanding my array of options. I'm ready to head into a new zone full of gears and electric fields. In this area, the platforming comes more into focus, while keeping up the constant pressure from robotic units. A few dark tunnels and winding passageways later, I'm up against a new boss, one that's much more of a challenge than the initial scrappy skirmisher. Platforms pop out of the environment, and three guns attached to rotators begin blasting in my direction. The guns are located high above, so I need to take advantage of careful timing, platform jumps, and smart execution of my rising uppercut ability to have a chance.

After breaking down the guns, the machine core reveals itself and I have time to dish out damage to the boss. Of course, in traditional boss battle fashion, after whacking away at the juicy center for a bit it goes back into hiding and summons more guns. The core seems a bit upset that I broke down its weapons and speeds up its efforts to destroy me, with the guns firing away at rapid speeds and arcs that take some serious dodging and evasion to handle. However, I end up shattering its weapons again, smacking the exposed core around, and repeating the process one more time to finish it off. This is a far more satisfying boss battle than the first, and we're just getting warmed up.

After traversing some more tunnels, I eventually find my way to the long sought-after drill. Not only is the drill a different beast in combat compared to the fist, but it also contains a wide variety of environmental uses involving air. You can create a wind tunnel to trigger doors, glide safely across areas that are full of deadly traps, or even use wind gusts to fly high above, allowing me to access new routes to reach areas both old and new. F.I.S.T. gives you new toys to play with all the time, but you're also expected to weave them together. Switching your main weapon is as easy as tapping a button, and you can change strategies accordingly in the heat of combat as needed, letting you deftly strike opponents and place yourself out of harm's way simultaneously. The third core weapon is the long-range whip, which targets in eight directions, allowing players to speedily strike enemies from safe and strategic positions.

With two of the three core weapons in hand, the game starts to really open up, leading me in various directions to unlock new secrets. There are plentiful pips to track down and increase my base health and energy values alongside a variety of other useful objects. Looking for lore? Scraps abound that you can find. The expanses of Torch City are just starting to show themselves. Will the forces of nature reclaim their home? For the moment, the journey will have to wait to continue, but F.I.S.T. is slated to hit this year on PlayStation 5, PlayStation 4, and PC. ◈



Solar Ash

» **PLATFORM**
PS5 • PS4 • PC

» **STYLE**
1-Player Action/
Adventure

» **PUBLISHER**
Heart Machine

» **DEVELOPER**
Heart Machine

» **RELEASE**
2021

EXPANDING VISIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

HOW HEART MACHINE HOPES TO WOW PLAYERS WITH SOLAR ASH

by Marcus Stewart

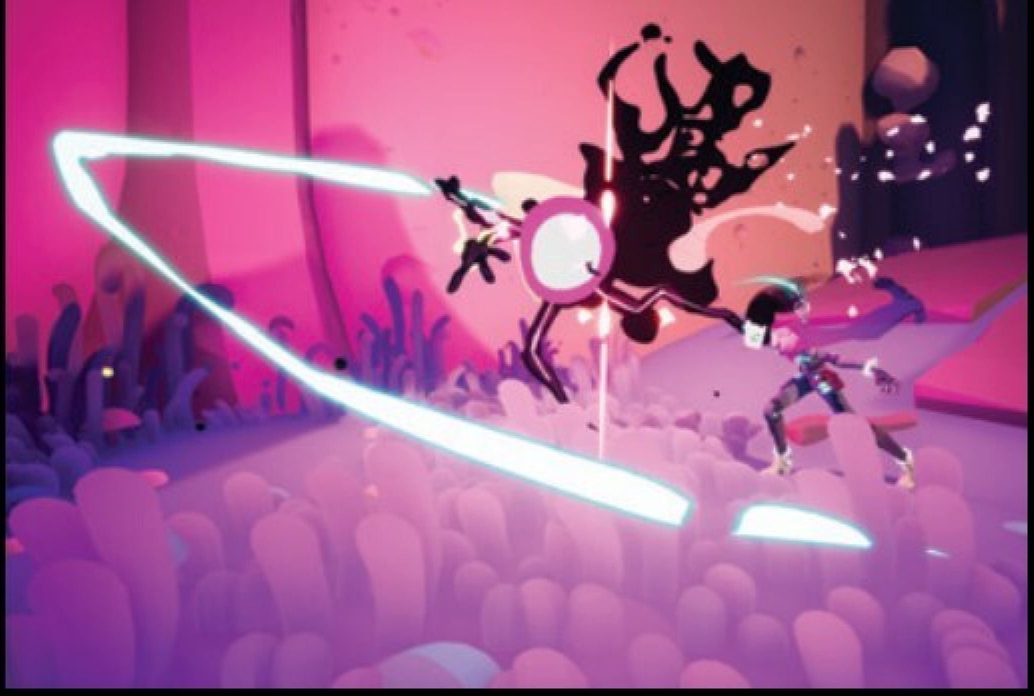
Solar Ash represents a dramatic leap forward for Heart Machine. After eleasing the 2D Zelda-inspired Hyper Light Drifter in 2016 to critical acclaim, fans of the game clamored to see what was next and many were surprised to see something totally different. Solar Ash is bigger and bolder than Hyper Light Drifter in every way, from its switch to a fully 3D world to its new emphasis on high-speed traversal over combat-focused dungeon crawling. But what is Solar Ash? Heart Machine's creative director, Alx Preston, took us through a tour of the game to discuss its origins, gameplay, and how he is coping with the fear of the sophomore slump.

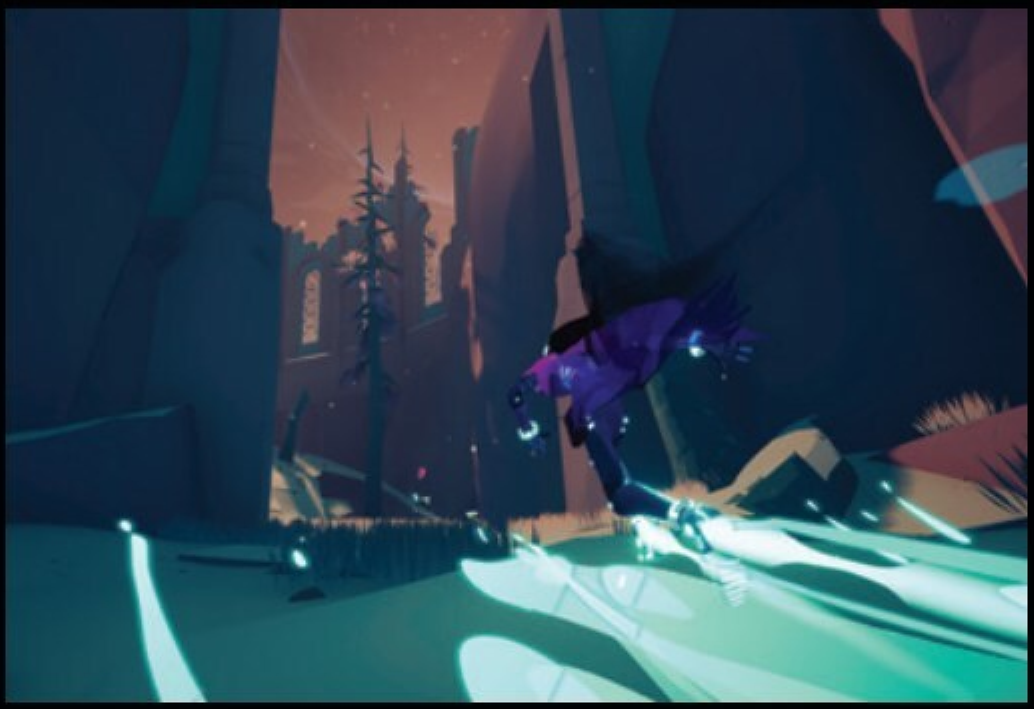
In Preston's words the "stupid elevator pitch" for Solar Ash is Super Mario Galaxy meets Shadow of the Colossus. Given that Solar Ash takes place in a beautiful abstract alien world, features tons of platforming, and pits players against titanic bosses, the description has merit. Unlike the 2D pixels that built Hyper Light Drifter, Solar Ash's fully realized 3D environments give Preston the chance to craft the sort of worlds that provided an immersive escape for him during the advent of 3D graphics.

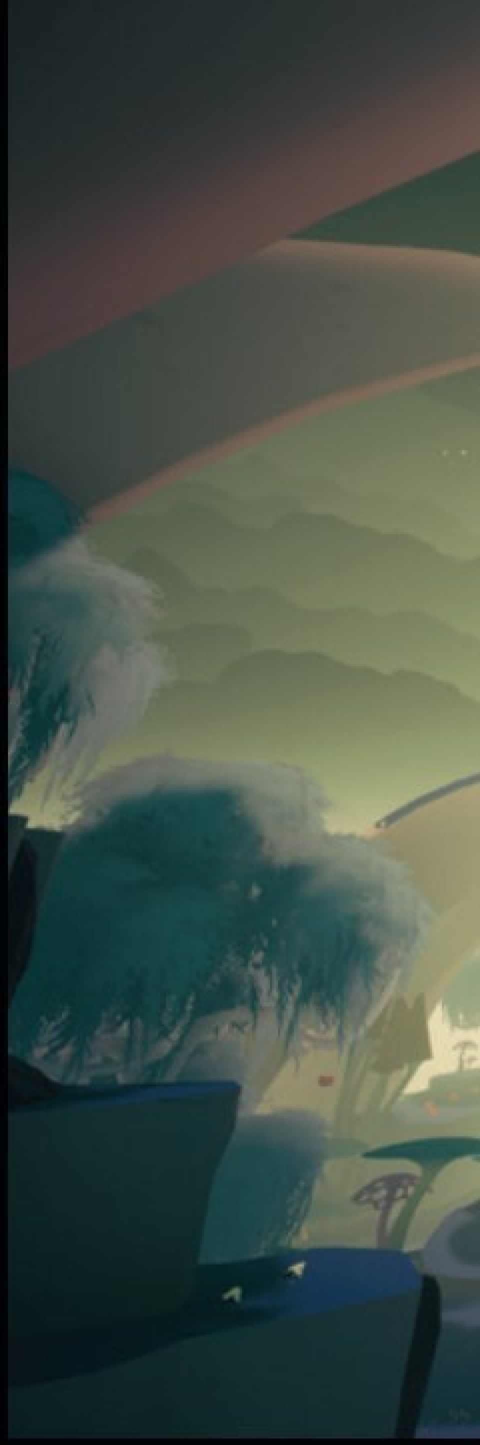
"I definitely at a certain point had ambitions beyond just 2D that I wanted to get into with 3D because that's where I think games really changed my perspective on what was possible creatively," says Preston. "My first few 3D games I truly loved, like [Super] Mario 64 and all that stuff, it just opened my eyes to a whole new world."

Heart Machine is still keeping most of the details about Solar Ash's plot close to the chest, but we do know that players control a voidrunner named Rei. What is a voidrunner, you ask? Think of them as cosmic spelunkers who explore black holes in search of resources. Preston describes Rei as a "very capable" voidrunner with a good head on her shoulders. She'll need to be good at her job, because one particularly dangerous black hole known as the Ultravoid threatens to swallow her home world. To prevent this, she'll have to dive head-first into the Void to uncover a way to save her planet.

Within the Ultravoid lies a fragmented world of surreal alien beauty. Tree-sized mushrooms, sea anemone-like grass, and luminous orange rivers – all surrounded by a layer of thick green clouds – are just a few of the natural sights players will admire. Solar Ash is a trippy visual delight that pops with color.







The Ultravoid is divided into various expansive biomes, fragments of the worlds that have been consumed over presumably eons. Everything is designed to emphasize the game's primary selling point: high-speed platforming. While designing Hyper Light Drifter, Preston originally wanted the game to feature speedy traversal elements. However, those ideas fell to the wayside due to Drifter's more limited scope and to focus on its stronger combat aspects.

Rei is quickness personified, gracefully exploring the Ultravoid using a form of skating that Preston says is inspired by games such as Tony Hawk's Pro Skater, Jet Grind Radio, and Super Mario 64. For Mario in particular, Preston was primarily fascinated in how speedrunners chain together plumber's moves to complete the game in quick fashion. "Watching speed runs and how they do it's like, there's a flow to that. That's super inspiring to me," Preston says.

In addition to skating and jumping, Rei can also grind on rails and utilize a handy lasso to hook onto grapple points to pull herself across gaps. Solar Ash is all about flow of movement and traversal, and Preston hopes that seamlessly stringing these moves together to overcome obstacles feels as satisfying as it looks. It looks so cool that it hurts the ego to miss a jump but thankfully nothing else thanks to the lack of fall damage.

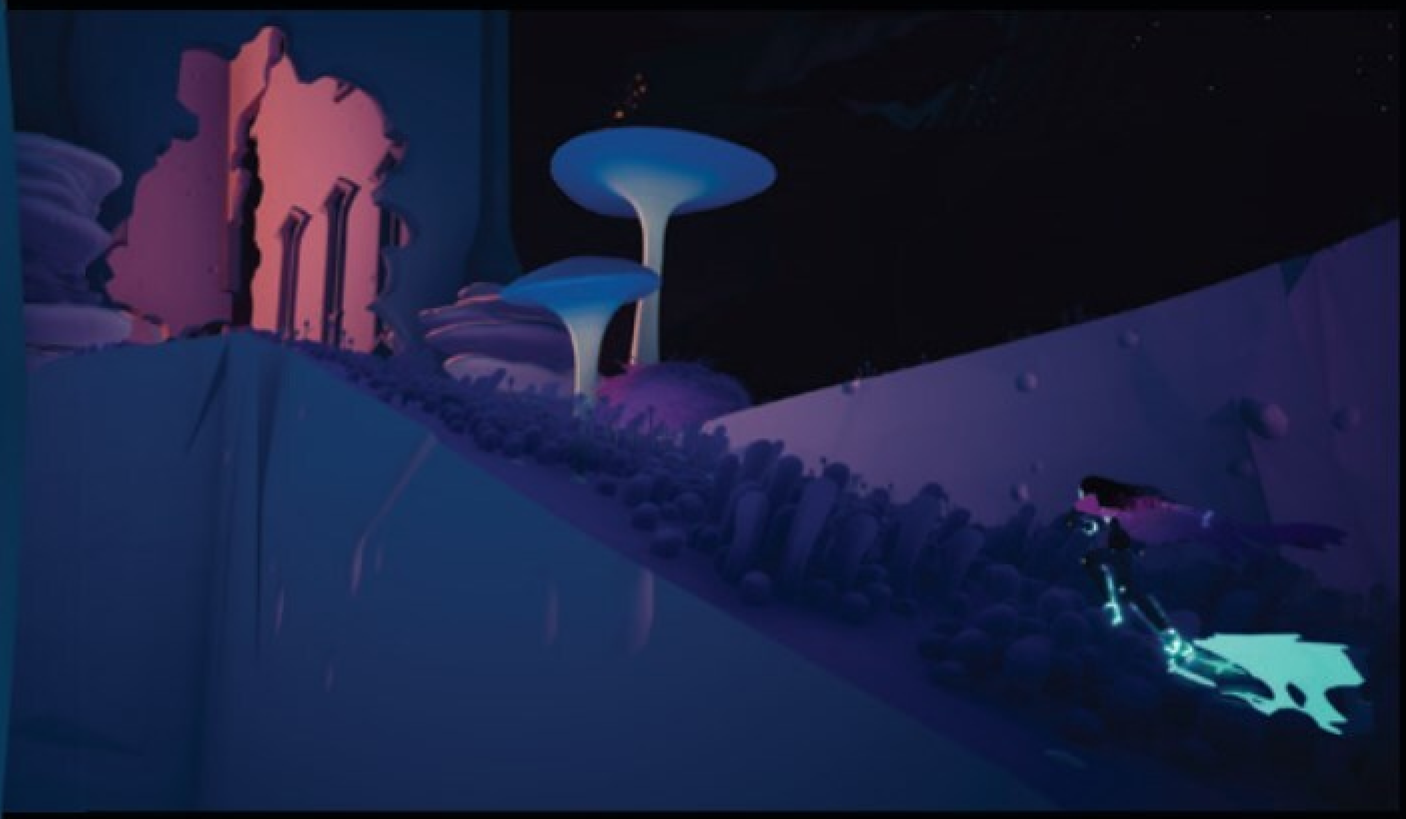
Along the way various monsters will appear to impede Rei's progress. They don't present a steep challenge; you can take them down in just a few hits. Don't expect to learn new combo strings or anything complicated like that, either. Heart Machine wants to keep players moving so combat consists of simple hack-and-slash elements while using speed boosts and dodging to outmaneuver foes before quickly returning to exploration. Since you'll still likely be in the middle of platforming while engaged in combat, the depth comes from how players incorporate the environment into their offense.

"We throw a bunch at you during platforming challenges to kind of elevate that," Preston explains. "So, it's a blend between the environment that they're in and the individual mob or mobs themselves. It's kind of that interplay and intersection that we're trying to balance out."

To that end, expect to face plenty of flying enemies or foes perched on platforms firing ranged attacks, in addition to opponents that just come at you head-on. But at the end of the day, enemies are more or less glorified speed bumps. They'll get in the way, but if you're both quick and savvy enough, you can drop them without losing your forward momentum.

You don't have time to sweat the small fry for too long anyway. Your primary order of business in each zone is to seek out and slay its Remnant. These massive beasts come in all shapes and sizes, but they're hidden and must be drawn out. To summon the Remnant, first Rei has to take out Dregs, strange eyeballs attached to walls and other surfaces that are scattered around the environment. It'll take some platforming finesse to reach and destroy them all, but doing so provokes the Remnant to arrive in all of its majestic beauty. The Remnant we got to see takes the form of a massive flying serpent protected by a thick, bony armor resembling a spinal column.

Of course, getting the beast to show its face is the easy part.



WHY NOT HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER 2?

Fans of Hyper Light Drifter were surprised and, in some cases, even disappointed to see how different Solar Ash was. Despite Drifter's success, Preston says a sequel wasn't ever a guarantee as he generally prefers to tackle new worlds and challenges.

"My attitude is really pretty fluid about what's next in a lot of ways," Preston explains. "It's how drained I'm feeling on a particular world or set of designs or ideas or how excited I am about something new and fresh. And so, I kind of just let that creativity steer me, and I think near the tail-end of Drifter it's like, 'Yeah, I think I'm good on this world for a while', and maybe I'll never revisit it. But never say never. Because who knows?"

The same attitude applies to Solar Ash. No matter how well the game performs critically or commercially, Preston says he may abandon this concept too in favor of the next exciting idea.

"It's not just, ooh, the mystery of 'What's Heart Machine going to do next?' It's really just about 'What do we feel like doing?'"

The real challenge comes in taking it down. Defeating this particular Remnant requires Rei to leap atop its back and work her way to its head. The Remnant soars through the air, challenging the player to stay on board as it twists its body in an attempt to knock Rei off. Rei gradually jumps and skates her way towards the front, taking out glowing nodes along the way until she reaches her target. Once perched atop the skull, she delivers a final stab to the head as a killing blow, the impact of which washes out the screen in a black and white flash for a striking dramatic effect. Although I got to see how Rei takes down this specific Remnant, Preston says other Remnants possess different behaviors and patterns. In terms of the number of Remnants players will face, Preston simply says there will be "a good amount" of them.

Once the Remnant falls, a node on a towering device called the Star Seed lights up. In every level we saw, this strange contraption can be seen from pretty much anywhere, and the central goal of the game is to activate all of its nodes. Visiting the Star Seed reveals that the imposing corpse of the Remnant Rei just killed now rests at its base. One would assume that this area will be the final resting place for the other Remnants but Preston cryptically says that "they lay as long as they may lay."

Zones within the Ultravoid may appear to be little more than a series of platforming challenges but there's plenty of secrets and lore to uncover should you decide to poke around. Certain pockets, which Preston refers to as narrative spaces, allow players to take their time inspecting ancient architecture and artifacts for information that feeds into the game's world-building. Solar Ash spells out its narrative in a more straightforward fashion compared to Hyper Light Drifter. It has actual text, for example. Converse with NPCs and they'll share personal stories about how they ended up inside of the Ultravoid.

"Our crews put a lot of time and effort into fleshing out and expressing a lot of different ideas about the kind of events that have happened here and sad or tragic stories that have occurred throughout these different biomes that have been sucked into the Ultravoid, "says Preston.

Speaking of other characters, Rei will also receive assistance from allies. One of them is Cyd, a sentient A.I. that provides guidance about each zone and backstory on the voidrunners. She also outfits Rei with some limited upgrades. There's also the giant, ethereal humanoid seen in the trailers. Rei visits this being often, and its role is one of the game's most tantalizing mysteries. However, Preston still isn't ready to delve into that element of the story just yet, so the creature remains left to our imagination.

Solar Ash has been in development for four years now, and Heart Machine has grown from having under 10 regular employees during Hyper Light Drifter's production to more than 20. Much of that growth has been staffing up on designers with expertise in crafting 3D worlds, and while the learning curve has brought its share of challenges, Preston says the secret to coping with those hardships has been ensuring he has good people on his team. "I think that's the key for me, was making sure to keep bringing over talented, good-natured people that wanted to build really dope stuff together that were good collaborators … it becomes a whole lot more enjoyable and easier to bear the burden of the challenge."

Of course, for every studio that has a successful first outing, there's always the fear of the sophomore slump. As a designer, Preston says he suffers the same anxieties about failing as any other creative person. He's his own worst critic, and despite his overwhelming pride for Solar Ash, the fear of disappointing players who loved Hyper Light Drifter occasionally rears its ugly head.

"That being said, you can't let it get the best of you," says Preston. "And you have to be able to push forward and focus on the stuff that's right in front of you. Not the what-could-be's or anything like that. Otherwise, you'll spiral, you'll just get trapped. And that's all it is. It's a trap."

Despite those anxieties, Preston couldn't be prouder of what Heart Machine has accomplished with Solar Ash and firmly believes it's created a fun and unique experience.

"Regardless of scores, of people being disappointed because it's not Hyper Light next, or whatever else, there's a ton of really cool stuff in here that you'd be a fool to miss."

Horizon Forbidden West

The weight of a breathtaking world

» **Platform**
PS5 • PS4

» **Style**
1-Player
Action/Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Sony

» **Developer**
Guerrilla Games

» **Release**
2021

Horizon Forbidden West continues to be one of our most anticipated games on the release calendar and every new look further solidifies why. Protagonist Aloy's initial foray into the mysteries of her post-apocalyptic world, where mechanical beasts reign supreme, provided adrenaline-pumping combat and intriguing discoveries. The sequel, Forbidden West, looks to build on those strengths while also offering new twists in both the story and gameplay departments. A recent Sony State of Play finally pulled back the curtain on some of these mechanics, showing Aloy has plenty of new tricks up her sleeves as she faces growing threats that only she can stop. We chatted with game director Mathijs de Jonge and narrative director Benjamin McCaw to further unpack what this means for Aloy's latest adventure.

After making her way through Utah and Colorado, Aloy is traveling westward, with trailers focusing on San Francisco, Calif. Like in her previous outing, she'll be able to override machines for mounts, but she also has way more tools to traverse this new landscape, which in turn provides more combat options. The biggest additions are the Shield Wing (paraglider) and Pullcaster (grappling hook). The Pullcaster can catapult Aloy to great heights, allowing her to escape harrowing situations in a jiffy. The Shield Wing lets Aloy descend from high points safely, and also can be used offensively to ambush unsuspecting foes from above. Her diving mask allows her to breathe underwater without having to come up for air, letting her dip below the surface to avoid machines, search for items, and boost through strong currents for faster travel.

The Focus Scanner allows you to spot climbing points hidden in the open world, which will be a big part of navigation. "We added free climbing to Forbidden West," says de Jonge. "Compared to the previous game, you are now completely free to climb anywhere, on any rocks, mountains, or cliffs. So, we've really opened up the world and made it more inviting to explore. And with the grapple, it's really great to quickly go up to something and you can launch to go even higher, then you can quickly descend with a glider. It's also a combination of some of these tools that make [them] feel very agile and fun to use."

Aloy still has her trusty bow and arrow to snipe machine parts and spear to chain combos up close, but she also has some new tools in her arsenal. She can blind foes with smoke bombs, slow and stall machines with adhesive grenades, and shoot off and acquire enemy weapons to turn their own firepower on them. In addition, she now has access to Valor Surges, which grant her unique and powerful abilities, such as the ability to knock back enemies, as the State of Play demo showcased. "Valor Surges are a new addition and the way you acquire them is via the skill tree, which also has been completely redesigned and repopulated with new skills," de Jonge says. "The skill tree is designed to support many

different play styles, and each play style has Valor Surges that you can unlock by spending skill points on them. The player can choose which Valor Surge is active at any moment."

While de Jonge said the developer will share more about the revamped skill tree at a later date, he did tell us how to activate the Valor Surges: with its own energy bar. "The way you build up that Valor Surge bar is by playing tactically, because in Horizon, if you play tactically, you are rewarded with tactical combat XP; it's its own point system. Every time you do a headshot on a human, or if you remove a component from a machine, we count [that] as tactical play, and you get a little bit of combat XP, and that goes into the Valor Surge bar. So, by playing tactically, you are rewarded by being able to execute these powerful moves. [These are] big payoff moments that you can use to your advantage, like the 360 blasts, which knocks back your enemies."

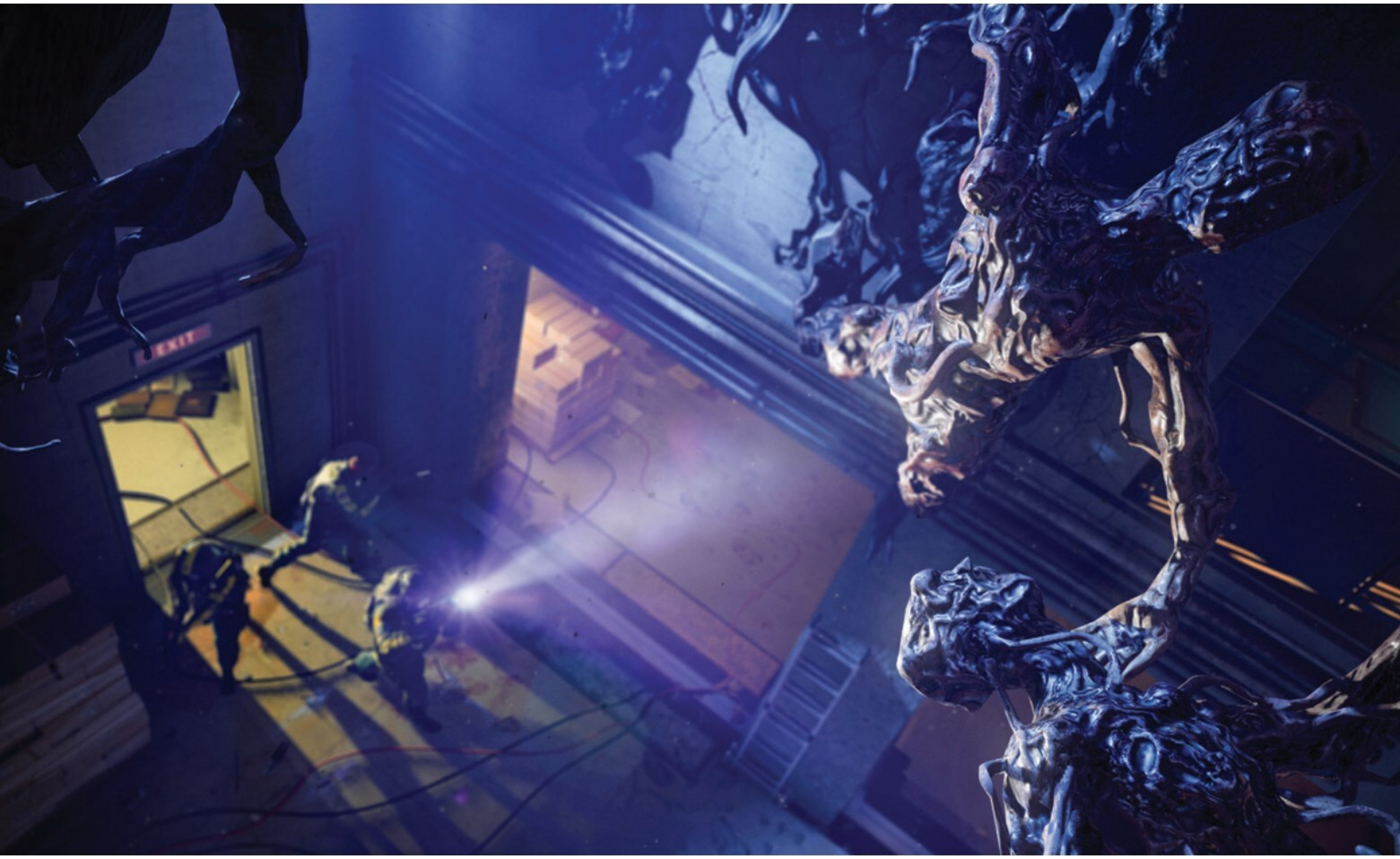
As far as the story goes, Guerrilla is still keeping a lot under wraps, but we do know Aloy is up against a slew of threats: a disease called the Red Blight, an incoming deadly storm, and a dangerous tribe that can override machines. "Six months have passed since the events of Horizon Zero Dawn, and in that entire time Aloy has been on a mission," says McCaw. "She knows that [the Red Blight] signals the degradation of the biosphere, which spells a lot of trouble for the planet, so she's spent the entire time trying to figure out what's going on and how to stop it. And that mission is going to take her into the Forbidden West – kind of this mysterious frontier that's alluded to in the first game. And when she gets there, she's going to get a lot more than she bargained for with new tribes, new enemies, and new machines. But also [there's] some good things, she's going to be reunited with some old friends. You saw Erend in the demo footage, and also some brand new companions as well."

McCaw says Guerrilla isn't ready to talk about the new companions quite yet, but did say the team worked to increase the amount of time you're around them so Aloy's journey doesn't feel quite as solitary. "What we really wanted was a lot more face time," he explains. "We want people to really grow that emotional attachment that they had with their companions. That's been a major focus of development for us on the story side, and on the quest design side."

We still don't have a release date for Horizon Forbidden West, and many worried it might get delayed out of 2021. When asked about that possibility, de Jonge said, "Development is on track," adding: "The thing is, these are just strange times that we're all in and we have never finalized and shipped a game under these kinds of circumstances. So, we are constantly calculating our schedules and looking at, 'Okay, where are we?' and 'Are there any unforeseen things that might happen?' We just want to be super confident when we announce the release date, that we're actually going to hit it. We just need a little bit more time, and then we can come back with a final release date." At least one thing is certain: We can't wait to learn more about Horizon Forbidden West when the time comes. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Rainbow Six Extraction

Surviving the dark



» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
PC • Luna • Stadia

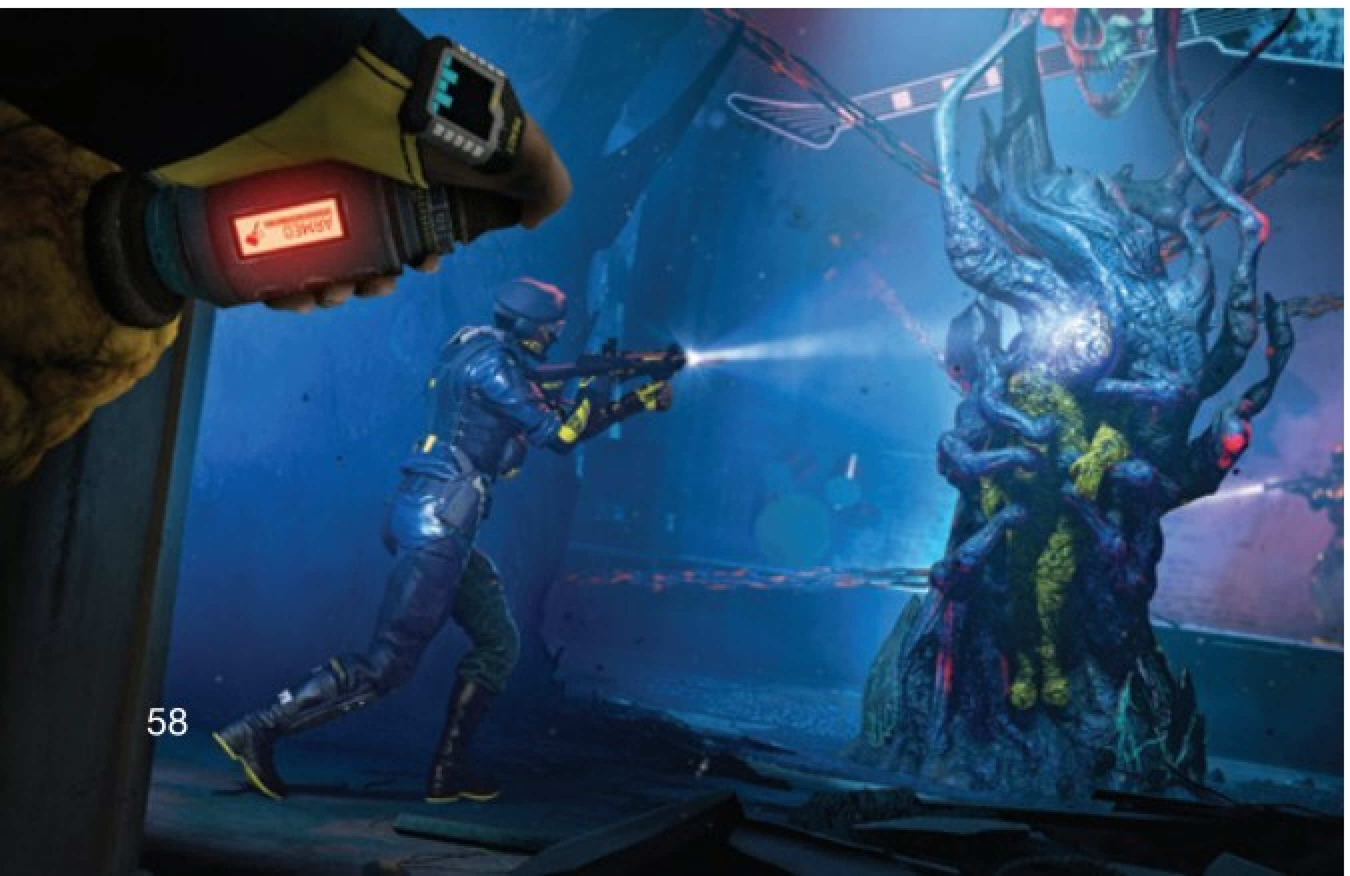
» Style
3-Player Online Shooter

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Montreal

» Release
September 16

Deep within the darkened halls of the Archaean's domain, we search room to room for Vigil, one of our operators deemed M.I.A. after dying in a previous match. After detecting a faint heartbeat on a cardiac sensor, we find Vigil unconscious and imprisoned in the trunk of an alien tree. Above us are long black tendrils scattered to the dark corners of the room, each like a root feeding back into the tree. The floor is covered in a tar-like substance, slowing anything it touches and growing its sprawling reach with each new corpse it's fed. Dotting the halls of this Alaskan research facility are expectant nests teeming with parasitic life. This is Rainbow Six Extraction, and it's tense as hell.



Low on health and one team member down, my squadmate and I search the room, carefully eliminating any Archaeans, the series' new alien enemies. Once the perimeter is secure, we barricade the room's breachable walls in expectation of a looming fight; and finally, we begin what can only be described as a ritualistic tug-of-war as we fight to remove Vigil from the tree's clutches. The plant's outstretched branches begin to pulsate immediately, revealing that hidden in the dim confines of the room are fuel pods feeding its power. To successfully remove an operator from a Chimera Archaean Tree, one player must continually apply pressure to the incapacitated body while the remaining squadmates quickly shoot the fuel pods as they become vulnerable. If you're coordinated enough to rescue the M.I.A. operative, you have to carry them to the extraction point before either exiting the mission or continuing to the next airlock, which serves as the safe room connecting each location's submaps.

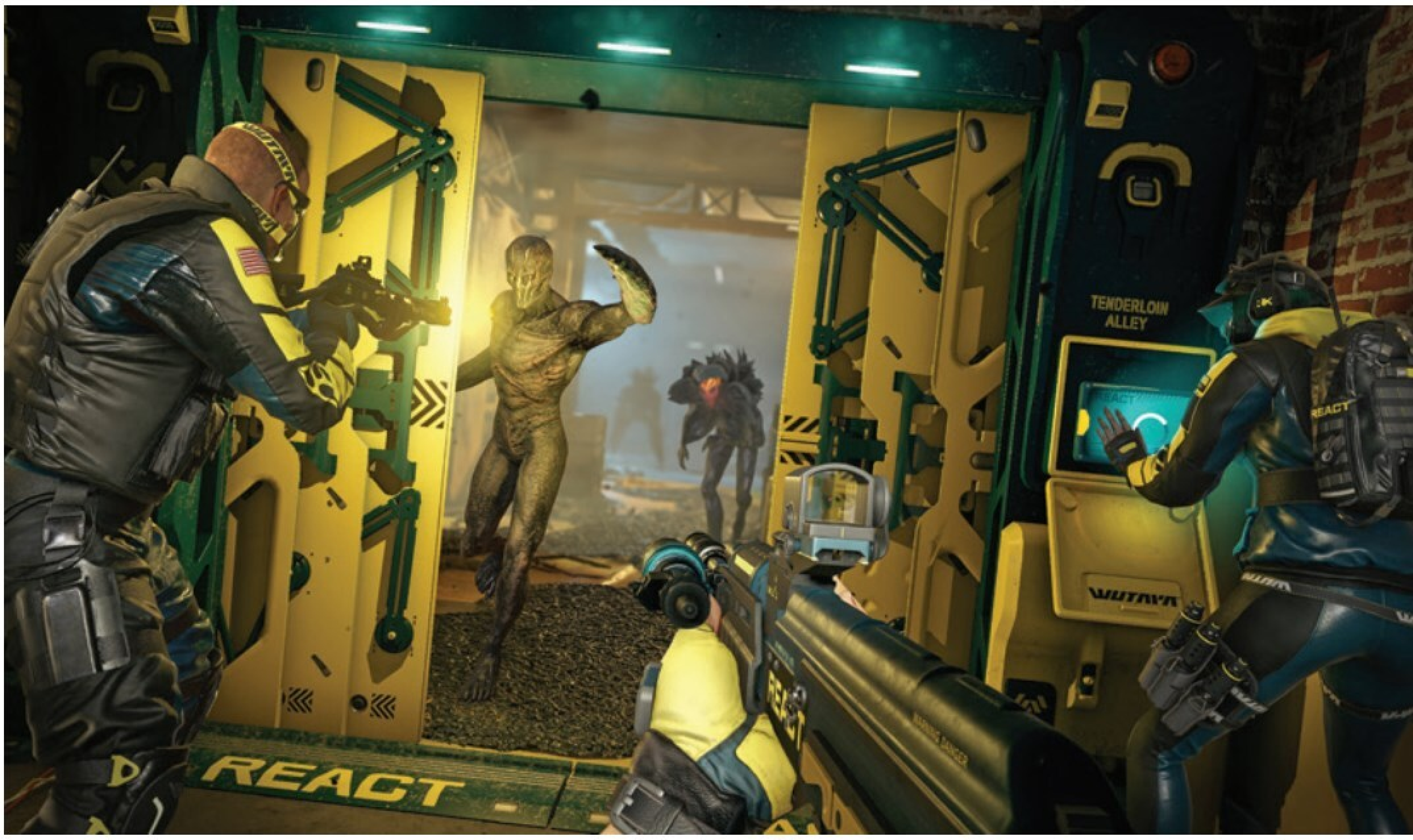
Creative director Patrik Methe describes the team's shared vision of crafting a new cooperative tactical experience in the Rainbow Six universe, saying, "We didn't want to come up with a hard mode shooter, we really wanted to focus on the tactical aspect and make sure that players are rewarded for playing tactically… And our reference was the SWAT team." Methe continues, "When they go into a situation with the need to confront a threat, the one thing they don't want to have is a fair fight."

With returning characters like Alibi, Vigil, Doc, and Ela, Rainbow Six Extraction feels like it's getting the team back together, and each of the game's hand-picked operators feel meaningful in the context of alien fiction. Speaking about the inclusion of certain characters over others, Methe says, "First we looked at their gameplay value and whether it would be the right fit in order to create synergy with other operators. But we also looked at two ends of the spectrum: operators that were really loved by the community… and some operators that, let's say, may have received a bit less love from the community – we wanted to make them shine in another situation." Lion and Pulse are great examples of the latter, being characters that don't get much playtime in Siege, but both have slightly reworked gadgets that make for a better co-op experience. Lion's EE-ONE-D scan no longer requires an enemy to be moving to be detected, and Pulse's cardiac sensor highlights nearby alien nests and M.I.A. operators that need rescuing.

While the game certainly borrows a lot from Siege, it introduces plenty of features that make for a fresh experience. For instance, the game utilizes procedural generation to connect relevant submaps together to create a larger, cohesive map. Then it dynamically populates those areas by randomizing the objectives, enemy types, loot pools, spawn points, airlocks, and extraction zones found within. In a game that spawns limited resources and enforces harsh consequences for dying, I often found myself creeping from hall to hall in search of much-needed health supplies while using silent takedowns and precise headshots to save on ammo.

Rainbow Six Extraction has many defining characteristics, but perhaps my favorite feature is that operators' health persists from match to match. If you previously played as Ela and exited the mission with only four health, then she'll start the next match with the same amount unless you complete matches as other characters. Depending on how you fared in previous incursions, several of your operators could be in an injured status, or even worse, missing in action until you rescue them later. Maybe your team really needs you to play as Finka, but she's recently M.I.A.; or perhaps you want to invest more time into your favorite operator to unlock a new gadget, but it's risky because they're injured. These are the sorts of decisions and consequences that Rainbow Six Extraction's persistent health system facilitates, and in many instances, they result in white-knuckle encounters.

From its burgeoning origins in the late '90s to its explosive success in today's esports arenas, Rainbow Six has always celebrated the tactical side of the first-person shooter genre, and the series' next installment seems to be no different. Yet, thanks to its co-op format, the game feels more approachable than its predecessors. Rainbow Six Extraction's persistent gameplay systems promise a tense alien environment while also leveling the playing field for folks of varying skill levels, and its clever use of procedural generation ensures that no match will be the same as the last. » **Alex Van Aken**



REACT
BACK
USE WITH EXTREME CAUTION

Far Cry 6

The revolution will be televised

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC • Mac

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Toronto

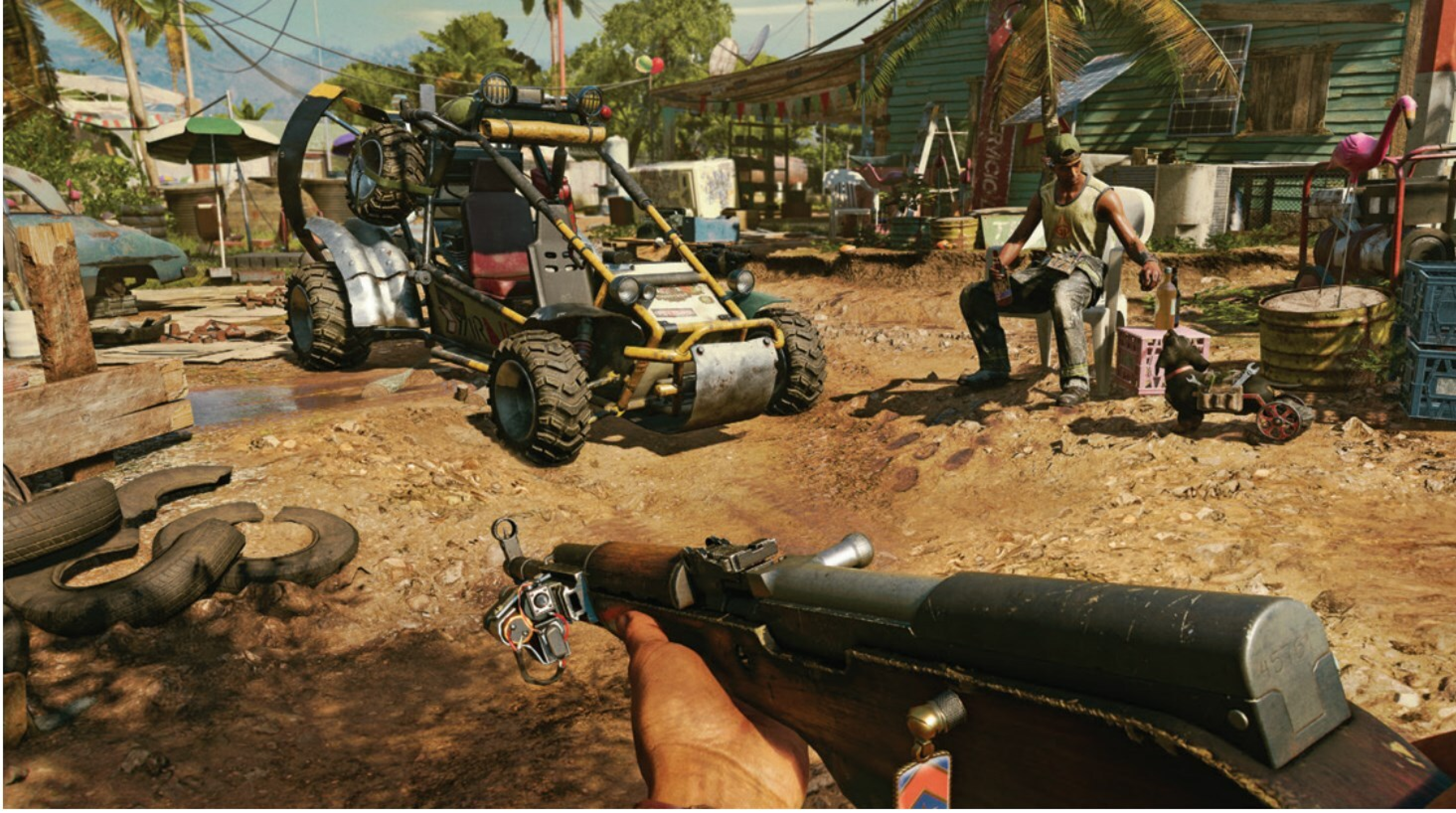
» Release
October 7

Antón Castillo's bloody reign over the Cuban paradise, Yara, must be stopped. You'll scour the island alongside a bevy of other revolutionaries to free the general public from tyrannical rule. As Dani Rojas (players can choose to play as a woman or man), you'll need the best equipment you can find. Sometimes, however, instead of stumbling across some rare stash or bountiful armory, you'll have to make do with what you've got. In Far Cry 6, you'll transform into a one-person-army and engage with Castillo's fear-inducing militia in dense urban environments, wild jungles, and scenic coastlines.

Far Cry 5's "Guns For Hire" is back, but this time your companions are fittingly called "Amigos For Hire." You see, Yara is expansive and beautiful, brimming with dense metropolitan centers, sparkling beaches, and lush forests. Over the course of the many intense skirmishes that you'll be catalyzing, you might find yourself in need of some company. Luckily for you, two such allies have been revealed: an adorable pup and a man-eating crocodile. Lead Game Designer David Grivel has adored the party system in the latest Far Cry titles since his involvement in Primal's "Fangs for Hire." "What was interesting for us," Grivel says, "was to create these different amigos to support the playstyles of players."

For instance, Chorizo, your pet dachshund, is as sweet as they come but packs an unexpectedly mean punch too. If you prefer the stealth approach when taking down command posts or patrolling platoons, let Chorizo run loose and distract guards with his incredibly adorable face and unassuming barks. Then, swoop in from behind with a bow knife and put those unsuspecting soldiers to rest; literally killing with kindness. When the smoke clears, don't forget to show the little guy some love with a flurry of pets.

On the other side of the spectrum, you have ex-KGB spy Juan Cortez's pet crocodile, Guapo (Spanish for "handsome"). This ferocious reptile looks better from a distance since he tends to close in on human prey and rip their skin and defensive fortifications to shreds. Guapo is fast-moving while on land, but even deadlier underwater as you can use his terrifying presence to initiate engagements or keep foes occupied. And much like his less-intimidating counterpart, Chorizo, you can



show Guapo some affection and appreciation too ... just mind that gigantic set of teeth, of course.

Yaran culture is appropriately informed by Cuba's real-world "resolver" philosophy: use everything and anything at your disposal to accomplish the goal/objective that has been set. As a seasoned mercenary and revolutionary, you must embrace this methodology to stay one step ahead of Castillo's gargantuan military force. In other words, you become a "resolver guerilla." While out and about, you'll likely collect a good amount of seemingly throw-away scraps and mechanical parts. These pieces can be presented to Cortez and crafted into weapons of notable strength. "When we went out to create new weapons, new vehicles, and new gear for players we really went crazy in a good way, for lack of a better phrase! And it's not all going to be just that," Grivel says. "If you know and love Far Cry, we also have realistic weapons – so AK47s and that kind of thing – but we really wanted to hit the notion of [weapon] customization from the start; that was very important."

Protagonist Dani Rojas is a force to be reckoned with. Orphaned by a squadron of blood-thirsty troops – like many other young, free-thinking revolutionaries in Yara – Dani chooses to weaponize their anger and grief for the sake of self-liberation. Wielding motorcycle engine powered miniguns, CD-ROM-ejecting SMGs, and unleashing carnage with a homing missile backpack are extravagant (and undoubtedly enticing) bonuses that come with the job. Far Cry 6 embraces the zaniness of craftable weapons so that you can star in your own high-stakes action movie. And when you're not in the mood to spark the flames of chaos and warfare, you can holster your weapon for the first time in franchise history to take a more passive, less-intrusive approach to navigation.

"[The holster mechanic] sounds small, but it's a gamechanger in the sense that now you can finally not be the center of attention constantly," Grivel emphasizes. "If you want to pretend to be a regular civilian, you can do just that, which is great for similar situations such as fishing or exploring the open world, but also for living out the guerrilla fantasy. Guerrillas often look like civilians and then boom! At the last second, they pull out their gun and start a conflict. That player agency is something you will have in Far Cry 6 as well."

» **Jason Guisao**

The Dark Pictures Anthology: House Of Ashes

Monsters in the dark

» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
Supermassive Games

» **Release**
2021

The Dark Pictures Anthology, a game pentalogy with each standalone entry mashing together different subgenres of horror, has been a roller coaster ride of highs and lows. Now approaching its third entry, Supermassive looks to change things up even further and shore up weaknesses in hopes of finding more stable ground. The new entry, entitled House of Ashes, brings new frights and surprises as you explore an underground temple and discover horrific creatures nesting there. It takes inspiration from famed horror writer H.P Lovecraft, particularly his novella *At The Mountains of Madness*, in addition to iconic films such as *Predator*, *Alien*, and *The Descent*.

Set in 2003 amid the Iraq War, House of Ashes begins in chaos. A U.S. military group is on a mission to unearth weapons of mass destruction located underground, but their plans get thwarted when holdout Iraqi forces attack them. While in the middle of a firefight, an earthquake disrupts everything, sending both sides down below into a vast underground temple.

All the games in The Dark Pictures Anthology have some basis in fact or legend. For House of Ashes, Supermassive goes the furthest it has in history, letting you explore an underground temple dating back to the ancient kingdom of Akkad, which existed in the Mesopotamia region. This temple was built by a real-world historical figure: the self-proclaimed God King of the Akkad empire, Naram-Sin, who reigned around 2250 B.C. Expect some claustrophobic and enclosed spaces, as you're essentially trapped underground, but areas also open up regularly so you feel the vastness of this unknown world below the surface.

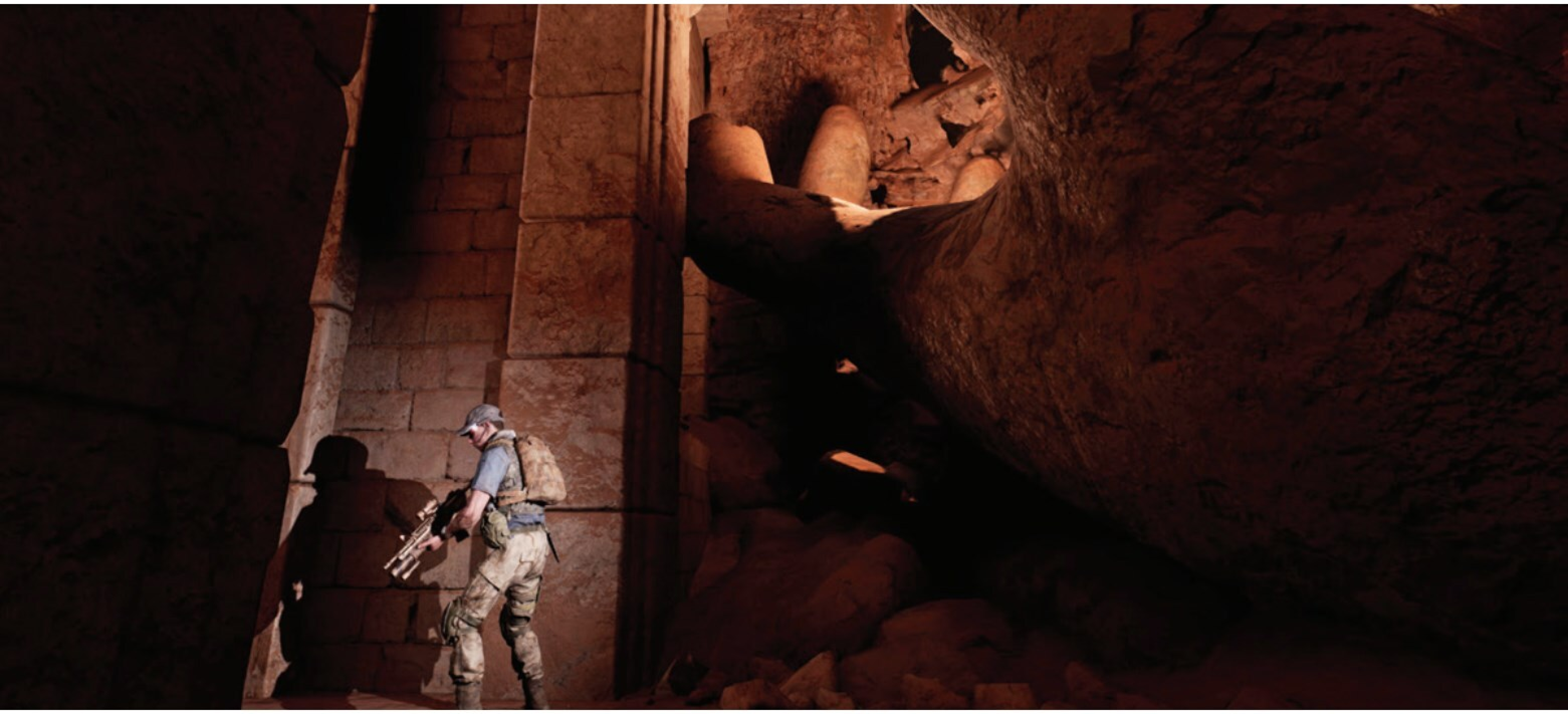
Unraveling the deeper mysteries of the temple and finding an escape route won't be your only challenge. You have even greater threats down below – a nest of monsters that are hungry for blood. "We want you to feel exposed, vulnerable, and threatened, to get a feeling you're being watched at all times by creatures you know nothing about," says director Will Doyle.

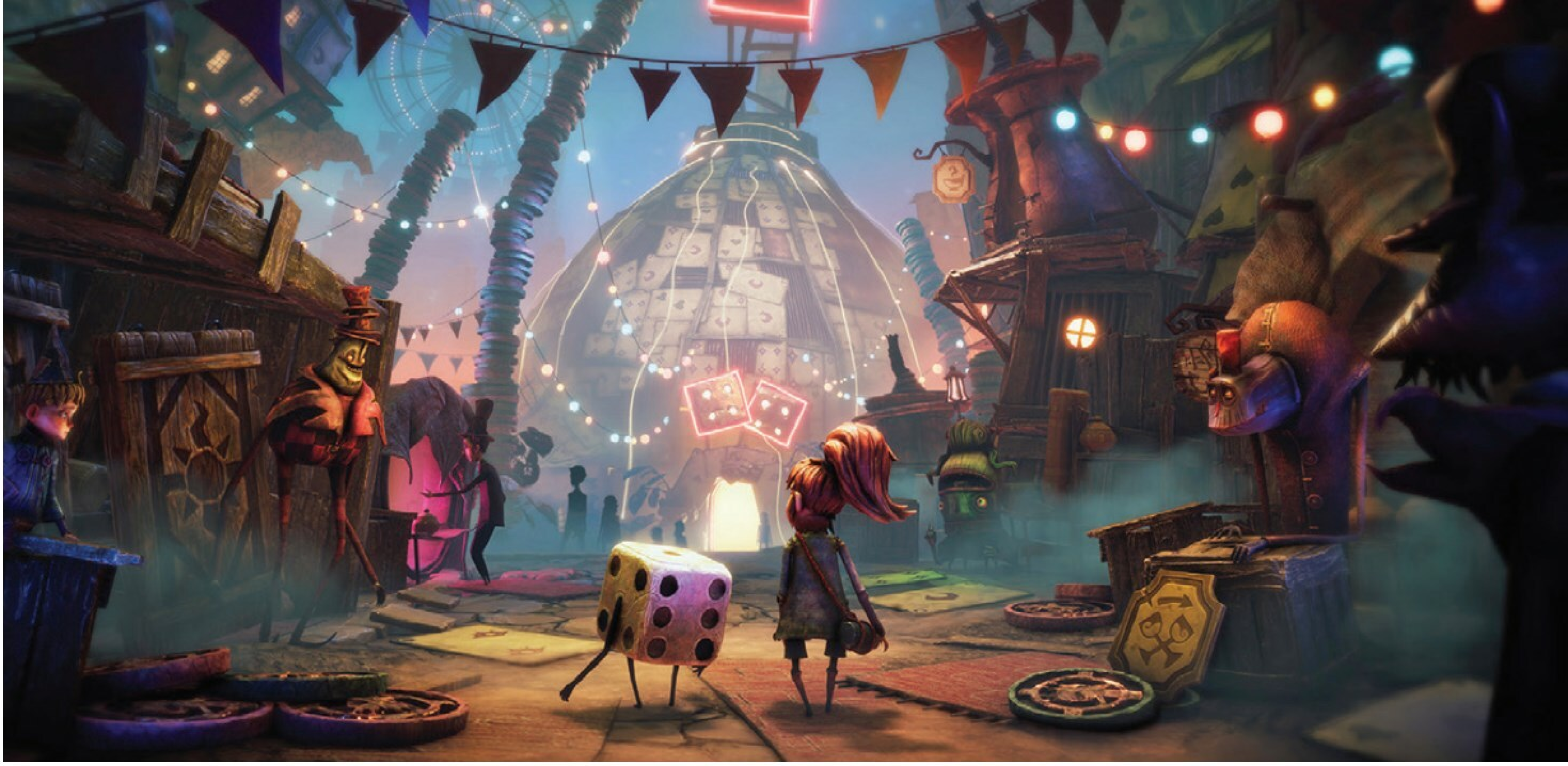
House of Ashes marks the first female star of The Dark Pictures Anthology, with Ashley Tisdale, best known for her Disney Channel roles, playing lead CIA officer Rachel King. Other characters who round out the cast include Colonel Eric King, Rachel's estranged husband, making their relationship complicated as she decides if she wants to move on with someone else, stay single, or reconcile. Marines Jason Kolchek and Nick Kay also join them; Nick has been struggling with the horrific things that have happened to him in Iraq, whereas Jason likes to throw his higher rank around and be large and in charge. Lastly, an Iraqi soldier named Salim gets trapped with them, forcing the enemy sides to work together. "He's a father," says producer Dan McDonald. "He's got a son that he wants to get back to, a life that he wants to get back to, and that shows."

With this latest installment of the anthology, Supermassive didn't make sweeping changes to the formula; however, the developer did make some improvements based on fan feedback. Fixed cameras have been entirely replaced by a 360° player-controlled camera to make exploration more immersive. A new flashlight button lets you search the darkest areas of the catacombs with ease for secrets and new paths, but it does slow you down a bit, forcing you to only bring it out when necessary. Difficulty settings (easy, medium, hard) have also been added to the game along with the ability to directly adjust the QTE speed to match your skillset.

Supermassive said difficult dilemmas around survival and collaboration will be at the heart of this adventure. "What risk would you take to make sure nobody gets left behind?" Doyle asks, "And when all hell breaks loose, is there any place for compassion, or is it just to look after number one?" Color us intrigued.

» **Kimberley Wallace**





Lost In Random

A game of chance

In 2018, Zoink Games released Fe, an art-driven action platformer about a fox-like critter who battles to defend their forest from a mysterious invading force. The following year, Zoink released Ghost Giant, a VR puzzle game about a giant ghost (what else?) who invisibly manipulates objects in the world to help a young boy solve his problems. Zoink's games have always been full of creative ideas and emotionally resonant moments, but they haven't often made a big splash with wider audiences. That could change with Lost in Random.

"We wanted to make a darker game after a couple of brighter, more comedic things," says creative director Olov Redmalm. "Ghost Giant had some darker themes, but on the surface, it was very bright and colorful and had a lot of humor. And Fe had a lot of mystery in it but was ultimately hopeful. We wanted to merge everything we had learned from before into one huge title that was bigger than anything we've worked on so far. We started exploring through drawings and took inspiration from different movies, fantasy saga stuff, and board games."

Lost in Random's board game inspirations are readily apparent. The adventure starts with a young girl named Even who grew up with her sister Odd in one of the lowliest districts in the world of Random. This reality is ruled over by a force called the Dark Dice, the "one true dice" that shapes the rules of the world. However, after disaster strikes, Even is forced to venture into the larger world in search of her sister. Thankfully, Even won't have to go solo as she soon befriends an anthropomorphic six-sided die, cleverly named Dicey, who has the supernatural power to affect the underlying systems of the world and defy reality.

Zoink is cagey about how exactly Dicey's powers work, but it seems that Even can use Dicey in combat – perhaps even rolling him to attack enemies. As Even explores the various districts of Random, she encounters giant robots, spider-like automatons, and towns where everyone has multiple personalities that swap out depending on the roll of the die that rules over the city. Zoink tapped writer Ryan North to help craft this original narrative. North is best known for his work on humorous comic books like *Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* and *Adventure Time*, so Lost in Random promises to be full of witty dialogue and oddball characters, if nothing else.

Lost in Random's unique visual style was heavily inspired by Tim Burton and the stop-motion films of Laika (*Coraline*, *The Boxtrolls*, *Kubo and the Two Strings*). "We started with a look that was even more like stop-motion but ended up a bit in between," says head of development Klaus Lyngeled. "We want to have smooth animations for gameplay because it works better, especially in action-adventure games. It's hard to do stop-motion animations with action gameplay, but the look is really inspired by stop-motion. You can even see that we modeled [characters and environments] so that they look like they have little fingerprints on them, and everything looks like it's made out of clay or stuck together."

Zoink's work making Lost in Random stand out is paying off – the game is already turning heads. We still don't know much about the moment-to-moment action, but the developer has dreamed up an inventive setting full of wild characters. If the action is even half as creative as the world-building, then Lost in Random could be one to watch.

» **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Zoink Games

» **Release**
2021

Kena: Bridge Of Spirits

Saying hello to my little friends

» **Platform**
PS5 • PS4 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Ember Lab

» **Developer**
Ember Lab

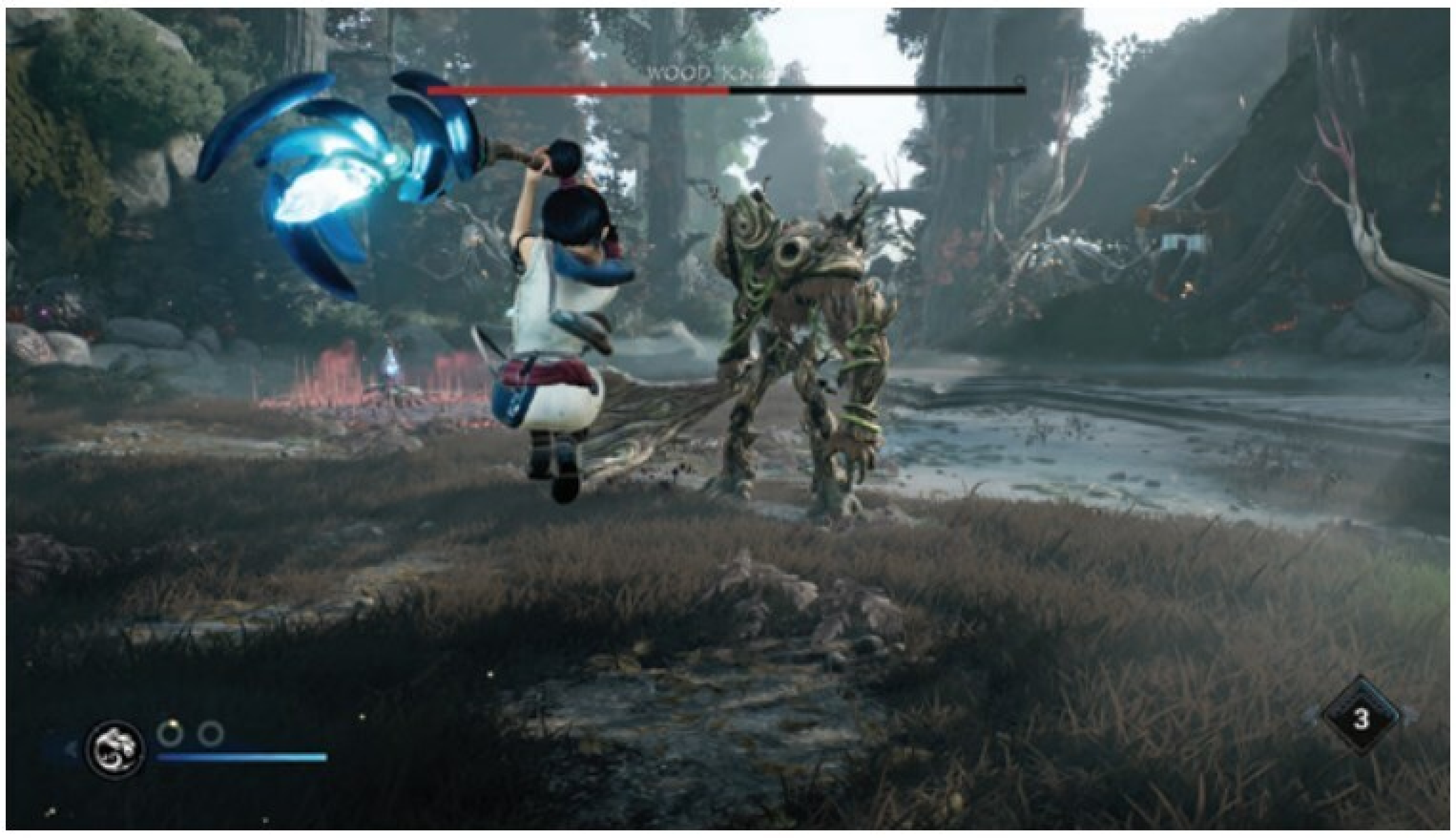
» **Release**
August 24

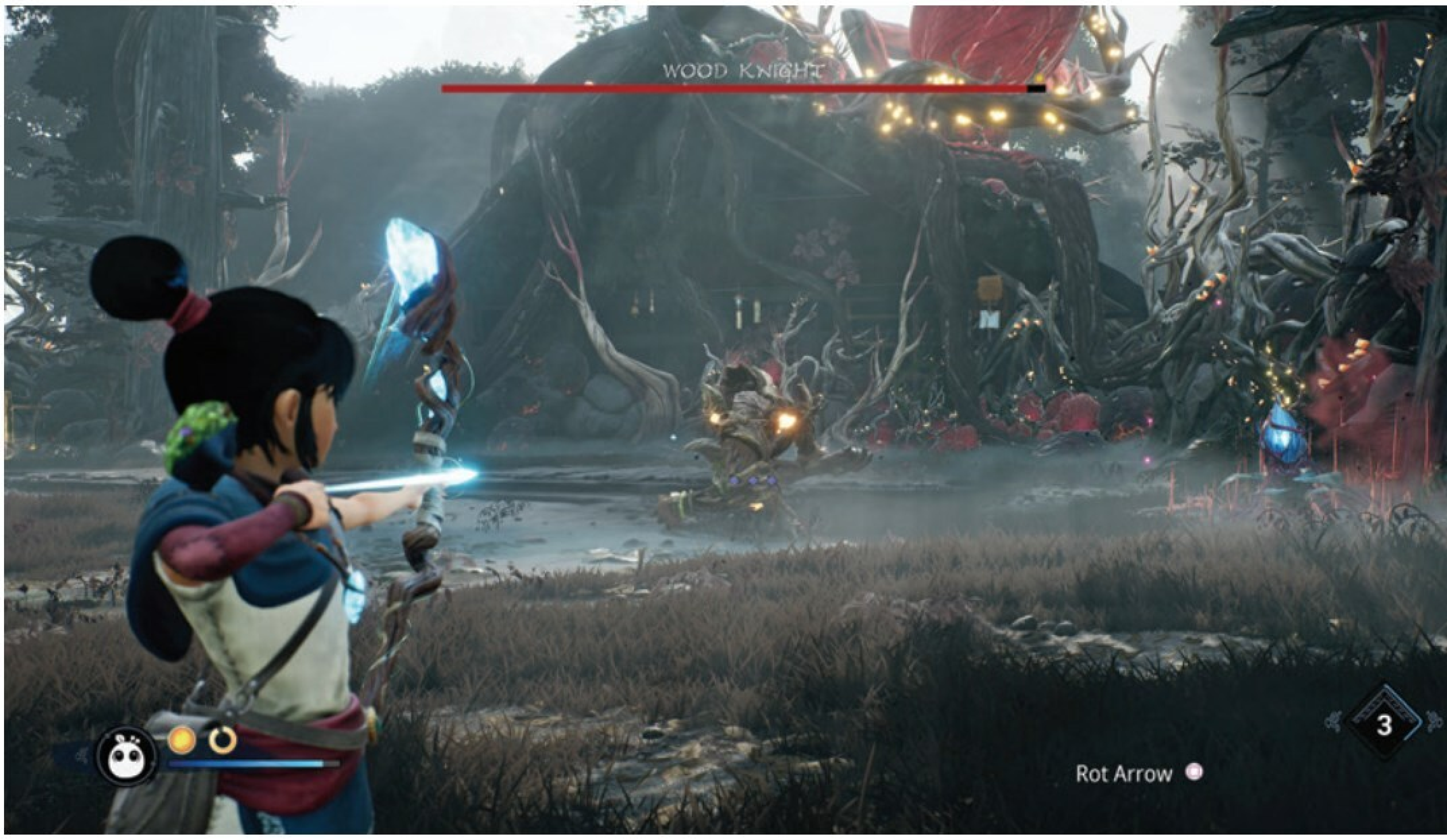
Even though Kena: Bridge of Spirits is just a few months away, it feels like it can't come soon enough. After sitting down to play through an early section of the game, I was impressed with its presentational beauty, Disney-esque light-hearted tone and characters, and teamwork-focused gameplay courtesy of Kena's adorable companions, the Rot. Suffice it to say, Kena looks to be coming along swimmingly.

If this is your first introduction to the game, the adventure follows a young spirit guide named Kena. She's responsible for helping troubled souls trapped between the worlds of the living and dead find peace before guiding them to the afterlife. We still don't know much about the overall plot, but the land is infected by a malevolent blight called the Corruption and Kena is the only one able to purify it. In terms of gameplay, it's an action-adventure romp that takes cues from titles like Zelda and Pikmin. Expect to explore ancient ruins, battle otherworldly monsters, and solve puzzles, all while having a friendly army of Rot following in tow. These cute little companions are responsible for decomposition (hence the name), so they complement Kena's role in maintaining the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

I catch up with Kena en route to a mountain temple in a forest far beyond her homeland. I've just obtained Taro's Mask, the first of several mystical masks created in the likeness of a departed soul. Wearing Taro's Mask reveals hidden clues and points of interest, such as footprint trails, as well as your objective marker. Despite being eager to make my way up towards the temple, I regularly pause to soak in the picturesque world. Everything, from lush overgrown ruins to the threatening crimson glow of corrupted areas, is bursting with vibrant colors and the art design is a whimsical treat. It sounds cliché, but Kena really looks like it would fit right in among Disney's modern animated classics.

Kena isn't an open-world game. Rather, it's an expansive linear world closer in scope to, say, the later Uncharted games, with a clear critical path that branches off into various forks leading to hidden goodies. Speaking of Nathan Drake, platforming feels comfortably familiar. Kena can perform a double-jump, grab ledges, and shimmy across narrow paths. Along the way I come across paths blocked by patches of Corruption, which appear as pulsating red masses of roots generated





by large flower bulbs. Purifying them requires sending the Rot to swarm the glowing bulb, then using Kena's pulse ability, a bubble of spirit energy, to finish it off. Watching the red dissolve into green is a treat thanks to flashy particle effects that make every restoration feel gratifying.

Rot are more than just cute tag-a-longs, lending tiny helping hands in clearing paths and solving puzzles. At one point, they pulled the rope of a semi-collapsed bridge to stabilize it long enough for me to cross over it. One puzzle required using my pulse to activate crystals in a sequence. A stone was missing, however, until I used the Rot to carry the displaced crystal back to the correct spot, allowing me to complete the puzzle. The Rot can also summon a temporary spirit dragon used to clear larger obstacles or assist in combat. It's a powerful partner, though controlling it and Kena using dual-stick controls feels unwieldy.

You can collect up to 100 of the Rot, but Ember Labs says 60 of them are optional to provide incentive to poke around Kena's beautiful world. I found some hiding under stones (which the Rot can lift up) and inside of hanging fruit. I always wanted to go off the beaten path to look for more of them. For one, they're cute, and two, they play an important role in combat.

Gnarled wooden monsters regularly appeared, giving me a chance to test Kena's mettle in battle. Combat takes cue from the Souls genre with light and heavy attacks mapped to the R1 and R2 buttons, respectively. Combining both to chain simple combos feels good in a familiar sense, as does the general ebb and flow of dishing offense before breaking to roll away or block/parry attacks using your pulse bubble. The fearful Rot abstain from combat until you land enough damage to fill a glowing orb. This represents the Rot's courage, and the more butt you kick, the more emboldened the frightened critters become. Once full, you can spend orbs to have the Rot eagerly join the fray, augmenting your staff to perform devastating attacks such as a hammer-like slam.

My favorite tactic was sending them to distract enemies, causing them to drop their guard long enough for me to swoop in and bring the pain. This became key during a later boss fight against a foe that quickly pops in and out of portals, whack-a-mole style. I was too slow to chase this annoying beast down myself but having the faster Rot squirm all over this jerk kept him firmly planted for me to deliver my staff attacks. Thankfully, the Rot can't die so don't fret about losing these cuties in battle.

Upon reaching the temple, Kena learns how to channel the energy from her staff to create a bow. This weapon functions exactly as you expect, but Ember Labs is tapping into the DualSense's haptic feedback to make drawing the bowstring feel tense and realistic. Popping off rapid fire shots or charging up one devastating arrow (courtesy of the Rot) feels great thanks to tight controls. After completing a series of target practices, I discover the bow is more than an offensive weapon. By shooting special flower bulbs attached to surfaces, Kena's arrow becomes a grapple that pulls her towards it, aiding in platforming. In combat, the bow can be used to target yellow weak points to deal critical damage. Doing so is easier said than done since enemies are always moving, but the reward for accuracy is inflicting some serious wounds.

Kena: Bridge of Spirits is all about providing family-friendly fun while respecting your time. The critical path can be wrapped up in 8-10 hours while completionists can expect to put it down in around 12. Its enjoyable combat, visual appeal, and whimsical vibe kept a smile on my face throughout my entire time with the game. I can't wait to see how Ember Labs brings it home when Kena: Bridge of Spirits launches August 24.

» **Marcus Stewart**

Dying Light 2: Stay Human

Leaving the light on

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Techland

» Developer
Techland

» Release
December 7

When I first saw Dying Light 2 in action at E3 2019, I was blown away by the enhanced parkour moves, the intricate choice and consequence system, and of course, the upgraded visuals over its 2015 predecessor. Unfortunately, after that initial reveal, developer Techland went largely quiet following a delay in early 2020. Now, Dying Light 2 is back with more details, a release date, and a new title: Dying Light 2: Stay Human.

Taking place 20 years after the first game, the old civilization has fallen, but a new one has taken its place. Dying Light 2 provides a completely different world to navigate, along with a new protagonist to explore it with. Aiden Caldwell, the player-character of Dying Light 2, allows you to see the world from a different perspective. He's not an undercover GRE operative like his predecessor Kyle Crane; instead, Aiden is an outcast looking for a long-lost relative, searching for answers about his past in an unforgiving landscape.

Like Kyle before him, Aiden is a seemingly fearless master of parkour, able to leap from rooftop to rooftop and scale buildings with relative ease. However, Aiden has a few moves on the star of Dying Light 1, with wall-running, hang-gliding, and even the ability to use zombies to break high falls. Aiden appears to represent how people would have to adapt to survive in this harsh world over multiple decades.

In his search for his relative, Aiden encounters many different people, many of whom react to your choices and become either an ally or enemy. Early on, Aiden meets the Nightrunners, a group striving to help the common person. The Nightrunners aren't the only group he meets, as Dying Light 2 puts the power of choice in the players' hands for which faction Aiden aligns with. Players can choose between three factions including the adaptable Survivors, the militarized Peacekeepers, and the ruthless, power-hungry Renegades. Based on Aiden's alliances and how he helps or harms them, The City is reshaped.

Unlike the first Dying Light (which took place in 2014) where the virus was largely contained to Harran, Dying Light 2's situation is much bleaker. The virus has escaped and taken more than its pound of flesh from humanity. Following the events of the first game, Harran was isolated in hopes it would stop the virus, but a small group of scientists continued studying and manipulating the virus in secret to search for commercial and military applications.

Around Christmas 2021, one of the mutated strains escaped a lab near Geneva, Switzerland. Before governments could react, civilization was on the brink of collapse and cities were burning. By the end of 2023, 98 percent of the population was lost to the virus, with only a few settlements remaining. However, one final bastion of humanity remained: Villedor, or The City as it has come to be known.

Because of this massive shift in the timeline and situation, Techland says you don't need to replay the first game. "Our game takes place some 20 years later, in a world where humankind has lost the war to the virus, so you could say that Dying Light 2 takes us to the world beyond the apocalypse," said world director Thomas Gerbaud in Techland's Dying 2 Know stream.

Within the seemingly impenetrable walls of The City, the residents created a new weapon to stave off the virus, but in the process created abhorrent new mutations of infected. As with Harran in Dying Light 1, the daytime belongs to the living, while the dead take over when the sun goes down – only now, it's more intense thanks to these new zombie archetypes. Dying Light veterans know that when darkness descends, the most aggressive and athletic monsters take over, making for adrenaline-fueled situations. After two decades of decaying evolution, players must worry about new creatures with giant claws, enormous mandibles, and other horrific mutations.

Aiden has a U.V. light to help stave off the dangerous, light-sensitive Virals, but his best bet for surviving the night is still to run for his life. With so much risk at night, why venture out in the first place? Well, with the dead roaming the streets, their nests are left empty, leaving the potential of major rewards for these high-risk situations.

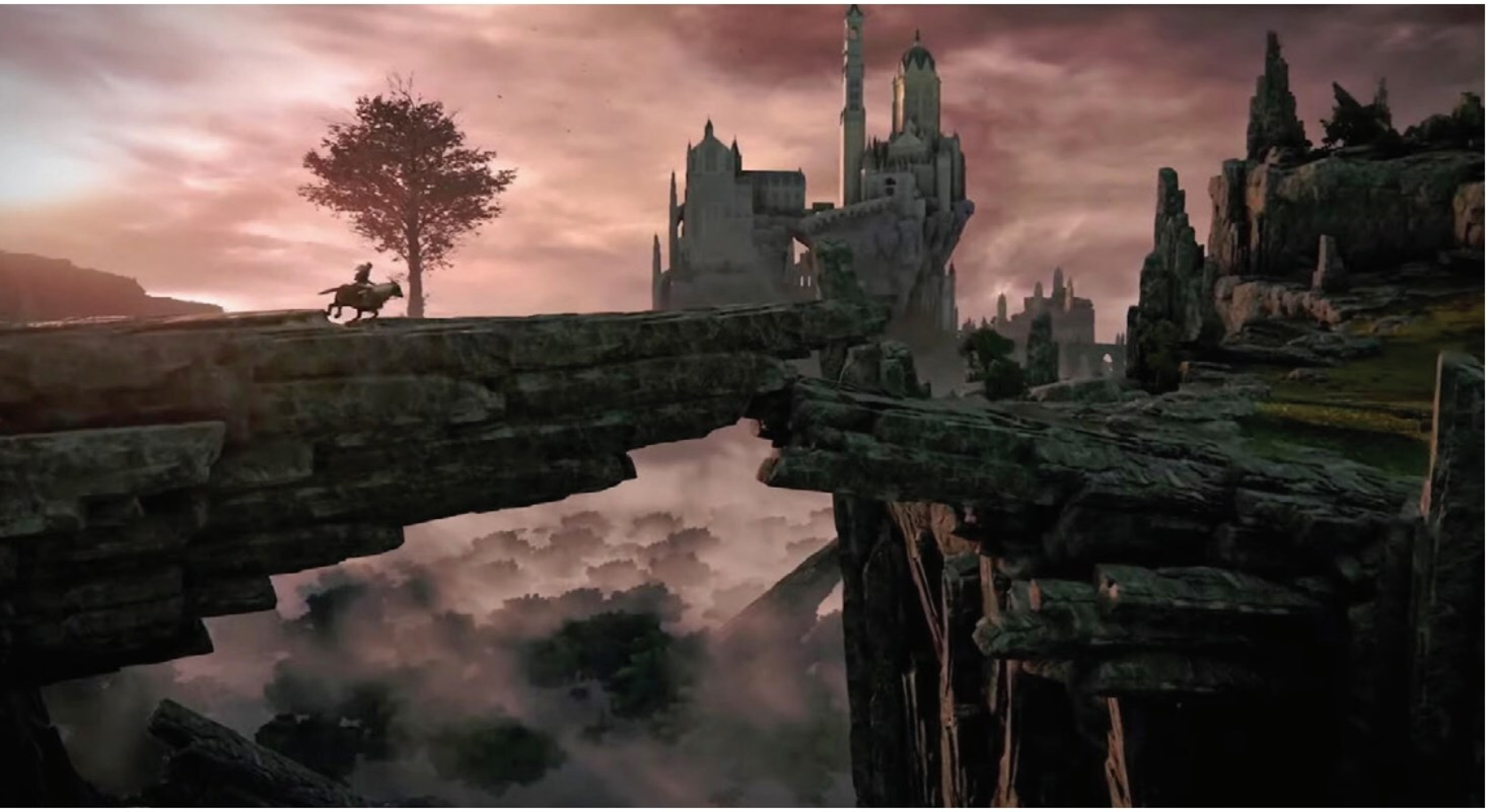
Stealth is an option in many cases, but when you have no choice but to face threats, it's time to use the newly improved combat mechanics. Techland has worked on how weapons feel different when you swing them, ensuring a big, powerful weapon feels different than wielding a short, quick-hit weapon. Dying Light 2 lets you develop your character to suit your preferred combat style, allowing you to focus on mobility, aggressive combat, or a crafting-centric approach that makes you more proficient in creating your own weapons and using them in battle.

Dying Light 2 continues to impress years after its initial reveal. Now that we know when we'll be able to get our hands on the finished product, it's just a matter of patiently waiting to see if the result lives up to the hype.

» **Brian Shea**

Elden Ring

Fascinating fantasy from familiar roots



» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Bandai Namco
Entertainment

» Developer
From Software

» Release
January 21

Since it was revealed in 2019 that a collaborative project involving Dark Souls developer From Software and author George R.R. Martin (*A Song of Ice and Fire*) was in the works, scant details about Elden Ring have been available, but that all changed this month. While an assortment of leaks gave rise to discussion about what the game would look like, a major reveal trailer at Summer Game Fest gave players a significant taste of what's ahead. If you're a fan of From Software's other modern action/RPG titles, a good deal of their DNA appears to course through the veins of this upcoming open-world affair. Beautiful landscapes, towering bosses, and a haunting atmosphere are all on display, along with a smattering of new additions to the From fever dream.

As one of the Tarnished, your ostensible quest is to seek out the great shards of the Elden Ring from numerous demigods who seek power for themselves. The progeny of the great queen Marika inhabit the kingdom coveting their Great Runes, pieces of the shattered Ring. By creating your own playstyle via a variety of archetypal fantasy abilities from mauls to magic, you craft the character you want to traverse mountains, castles, swamps, and more.

Elden Ring features mounted traversal and combat. The extent of this mechanic isn't entirely known, but we've seen a spectral stag summoned from out of nowhere and immediately used to speed around open environments. Mounted combat that appears to be some kind of caravan interception is also featured in the trailer. The mount is seen to burst up sheer surfaces, allowing the player to ascend to new locations at incredible speeds.

The open world itself is noteworthy. While the Souls titles are beloved, their area designs are often completely closed-off corridors. On display here are huge areas that combine with the new traversal methods to offer completely new opportunities for From Software to embrace. Watching the trailer almost conjures up notions of Shadow of the Colossus as the player navigates vast areas that don't appear to have any gating at all. Taking a little bit of Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice's essence with a jump button and possible stealth mechanics and injecting it into what appears to be slightly speedier combat in the vein of Dark Souls III may give players a variety of methods to tackle encounters.

As with prior From Software titles, you can opt to team up with other players to take on challenging fights with online functionality, though we don't have any details on how many players will be able to be in one world together.

There's no doubt that many aspects from the Souls games have made their way into Elden Ring. That said, the sheer ambition and potential for From's previous formulas to shine in an all-new way in an open-world environment is downright exhilarating. We can't wait to see more of Elden Ring as we head toward a release early next year. » **Daniel Tack**

Evil Dead: The Game

Ash comes back

Recently, during Geoff Keighley's Summer Game Fest event, the first gameplay for Evil Dead: The Game was shown off. The title was first announced at The Game Awards 2019, another Keighley event, as a collaboration between publisher Saber Interactive and developer Boss Team Games.

Structurally, Evil Dead: The Game looks remarkably similar to other horror-inspired multiplayer games Friday The 13th and Dead By Daylight. Which is to say, a group of players must outwit and survive their hellish opposition – 4v1 style. Instead of playing as Jason Voorhees or Pyramid Head, though, players can assume the roles of characters like Ash Williams – Bruce Campbell's iconic, chainsaw-wielding character from the films – Lord Arthur, or Pablo Simon. We don't know the full list of playable characters yet, but we do know to expect appearances from *Evil Dead*, *Evil Dead 2*, *Army of Darkness*, and *Ash vs Evil Dead*. Campbell has also recorded new dialogue for the game, reprising his role as Ash; we expect he'll say "groovy" a lot.

Players can choose to play as either the survivors or Ash (good or bad, respectively), trying to either escape or hunt down the other players. Survivors will be able to find pages of the *Necronomicon*, lost tapes, and other "lost artifacts." Ash can use possession to take control of the environment, Deadites, and the survivors themselves in an attempt to swallow their souls. Iconic film weapons, such as the chainsaw and short-barrel shotgun, will be available to tear through enemies, and the game's website also mentions a "physics-based gore system" – if you're into that kind of thing.

Interestingly enough, Evil Dead: The Game is part of a larger swath of new Evil Dead media coming out. There is, of course, the original trilogy, as well as the 2013 reboot by director Fede Álvarez and the Starz show *Ash vs Evil Dead*. A new film is also on the horizon; *Evil Dead Rises* is expected to come out next year on HBO Max, written and directed by Lee Cronin, who made his directorial debut in 2019 with *The Hole in the Ground*. Add the game coming out this year, and it's a pretty good time to be an Evil Dead fan. » **Blake Hester**

» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
5-Player Online Action

» **Publisher**
Saber Interactive

» **Developer**
Boss Team Games

» **Release**
2021

Overwatch 2

Big sequel, big changes

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
10-Player Online Shooter

» Publisher
Blizzard Entertainment

» Developer
Blizzard Entertainment

» Release
TBA

Since its reveal at BlizzCon 2019, fans have wondered what Overwatch 2 is bringing to the core Overwatch experience. Well, now we have a pretty solid idea, at least on the PvP front. Blizzard announced some rather striking changes planned for Overwatch 2, including a team size change and the removal of the Assault game type, commonly known as 2CP. This changes team compositions radically moving forward. While this decision will definitely impact us at home as we learn the new meta, this change is certain to have serious implications for professional Overwatch teams and the game's esports scene.

Class roles are also getting some subtle, yet extremely relevant tweaks. Damage heroes move slightly faster, tanks get knockback reduction, and supports heal themselves when they're out of combat.

"Overwatch players will tell you, well, what's the right time for Reinhardt to use charge? And the answer is… don't. And we've all had that feeling when we're playing Overwatch and we watch our Reinhardt charging and we're like, no, don't do that," says former game director Jeff Kaplan, who recently left Blizzard. "And a lot of what's going on with the sort of changes you know, trying more of this brawler role is well, what is this fantasy that players have? How do you make it right for players to swing the hammer instead of just holding the shield up? How can we create space for that to be the fun thing to do?"

Other more minor tweaks have also been announced alongside these sweeping changes, like some altering of Mei's abilities to make her ice slow but not freeze completely.

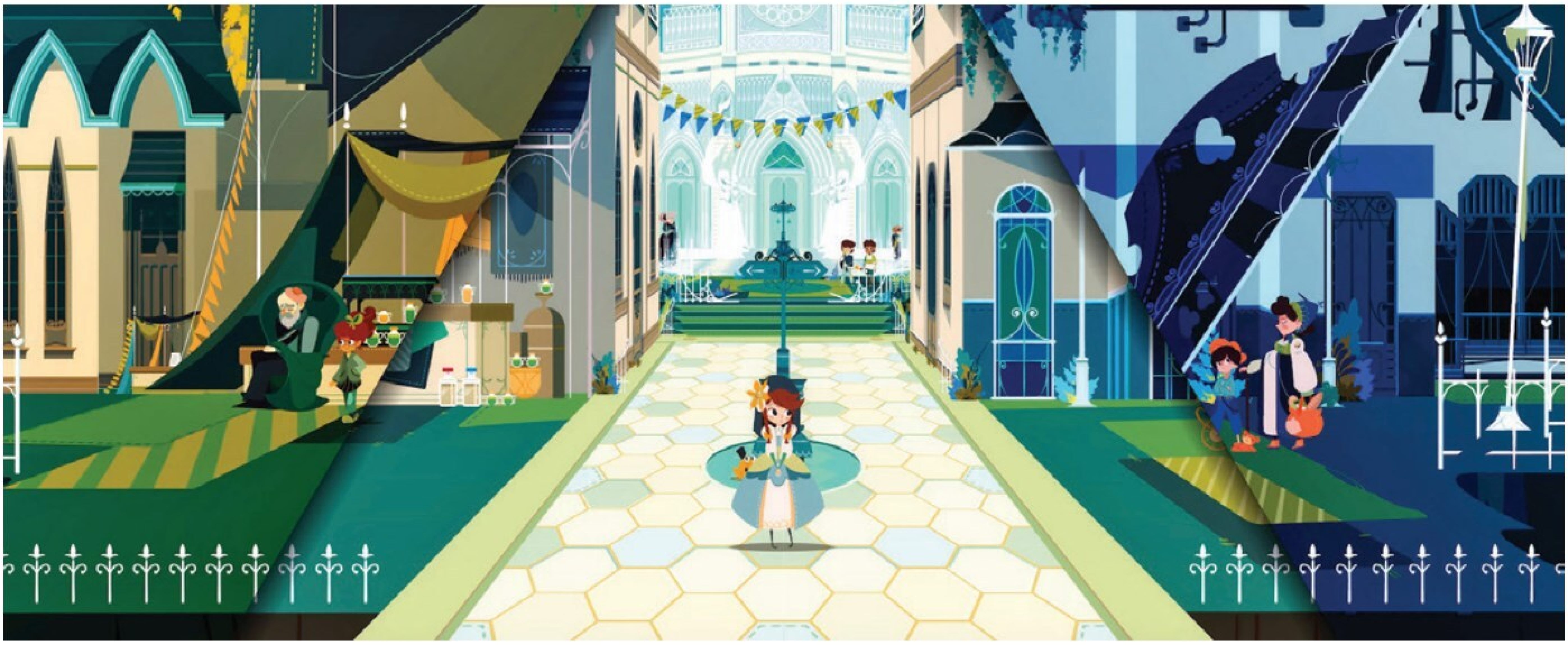
With Kaplan off the project and exiting Blizzard, the team continues to push forward, showcasing some of the new maps and locations that players can head to in Overwatch 2. New York, Toronto, Rome, and Rio all look fantastic, but the luxurious Monte Carlo is the ultimate show-stealer. Battle it out around opulent furnishings, stylish casinos, and all the VIP status you can muster in one of Overwatch's most elite arenas.

While PvP has been the latest area of focus, the PvE elements are still a big part of what makes Overwatch 2 a sequel. Players are expected to be able to participate in co-op encounters against a wide variety of enemies, with varying objectives and goals to change it up every time. The replayable, highly-customizable co-op aspect and narrative campaign are two elements that, despite seeing quite a bit of it a few years ago, haven't gotten much new information.

We do know that these modes allow players to create builds that would never be allowed in traditional PvP, like a Junkrat that can dual-wield grenade launchers or Reaper with a sniper loadout. With wildly different specs and missions that can offer up different challenges each time you play, such as an ever-encroaching wall of death that requires you to keep pressing forward, Blizzard aims to keep the co-op vibrant and interesting match after match.

While COVID-19 is responsible for jamming up a ton of games, we hope to see more about these features before the next big Blizzard information drop in the form of a hybrid digital/physical event slated for early next year. » **Daniel Tack**

TERMINAL
GRAND CENTRAL

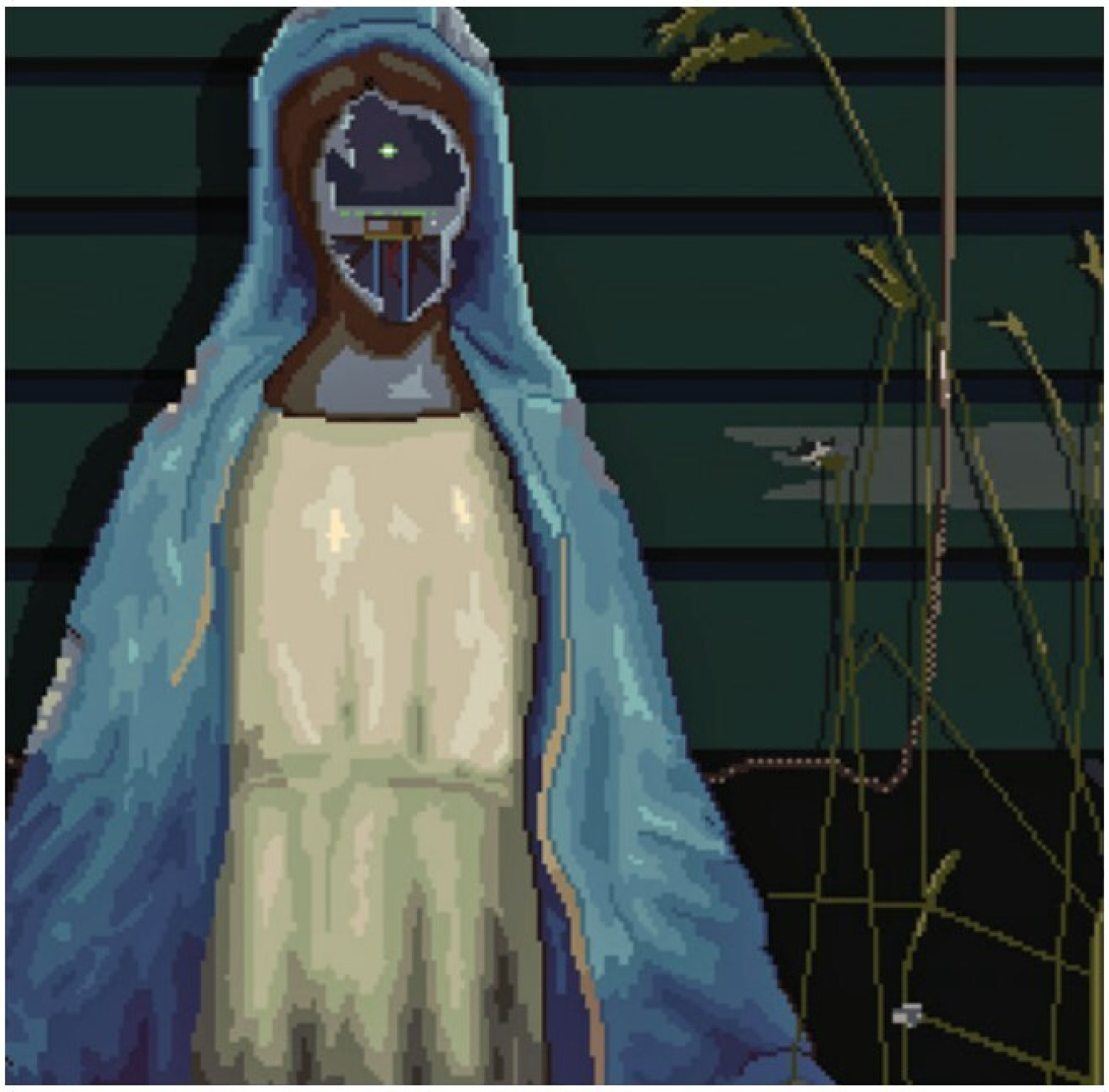


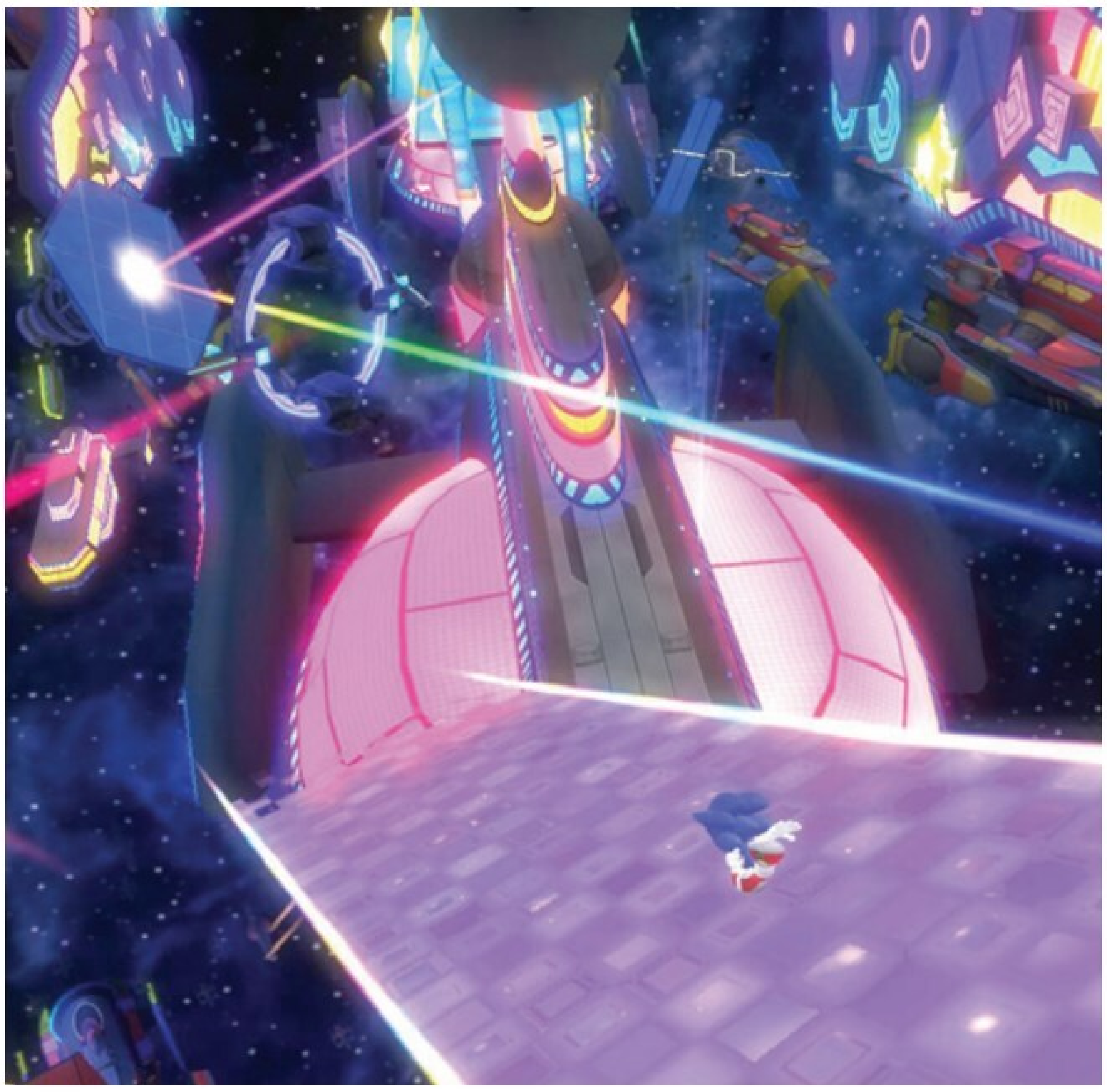
Cris Tales

We've eagerly awaited this gorgeous time-bending RPG for a long time and the wait is almost over. Cris Tales stars Crisbell, a warrior with the power to manipulate time which she can use to explore past, present, and future versions of her fairytale-like world. The screen is divided into three viewpoints representing each time period, allowing you to simultaneously peer into multiple versions of an area. In battle, sending a monster to the past side could make it younger and weaker, but faster. Conversely, enemies sent to the future may gain power thanks to the added experience but move slower due to age. Discovering the various effects time has on enemies sounds like a blast, and sets the table for a deeply strategic combat system. If you're a fan of classic JRPGs like Chrono Trigger and Final Fantasy VI, keep your eye on Cris Tales when it launches July 20 for PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC.

Norco

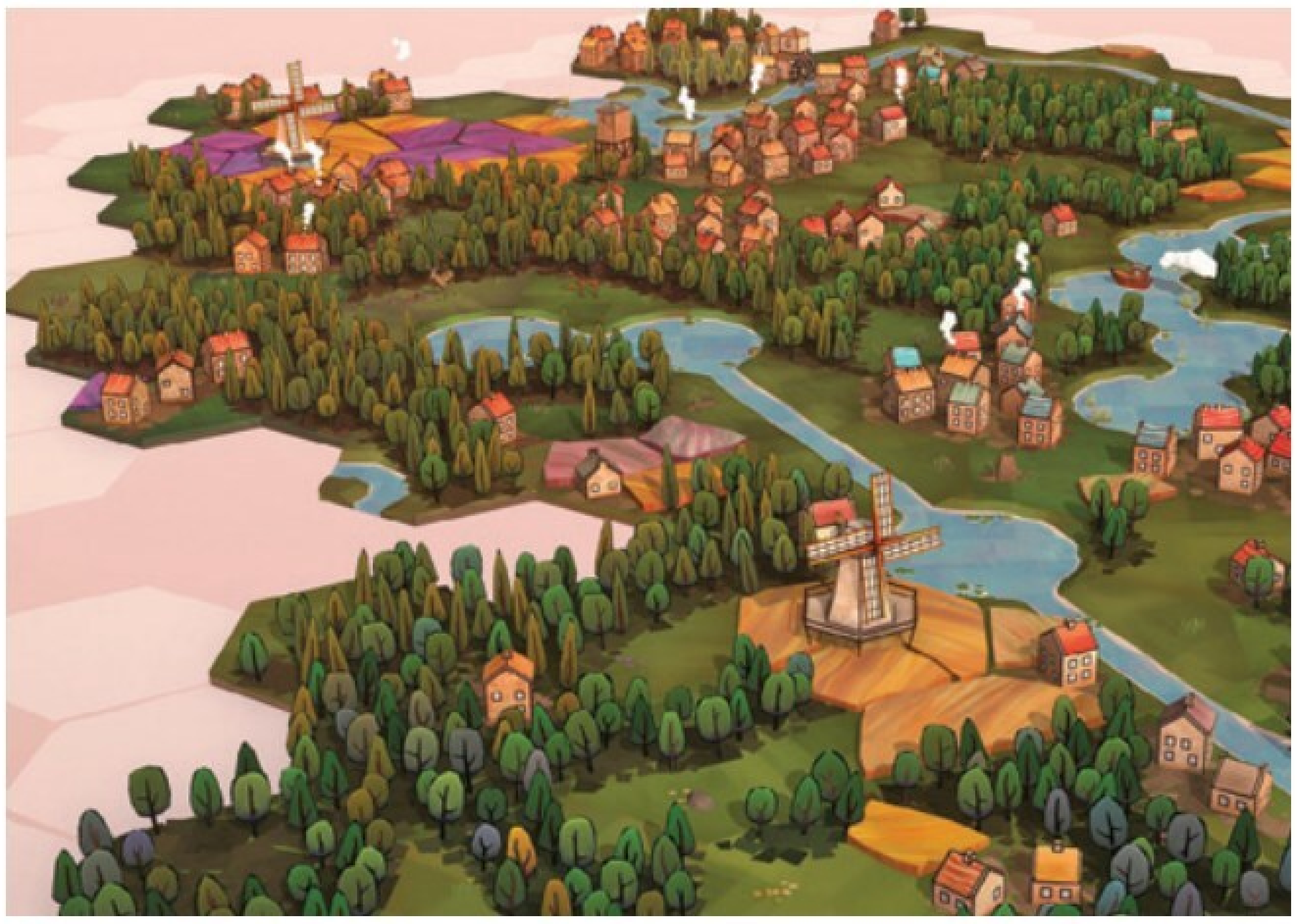
Set in a sci-fi Louisiana, Norco is an upcoming point-and-click adventure game by developer Geography of Robots. When your brother Blake goes missing after your mother's death, you take it upon yourself to find him, following a security bot through New Orleans. Norco allows players to explore isolated and populated parts of New Orleans, with options to fight, sneak, or talk your way through situations, and even recruit a "wild-eyed river dog." Norco is coming to PC.





Sonic Colors: Ultimate

In 2010, Sonic Colors delivered one of the best 3D Sonic games to date, featuring vibrant colors, fun level design, and unique power ups. Unfortunately, it's become increasingly difficult to play thanks to its Wii exclusivity. This remaster not only brings the game to modern platforms, but also upscales the visuals and adds a new mode where you race against Metal Sonic. Sonic Colors: Ultimate comes to PS4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC on September 7.

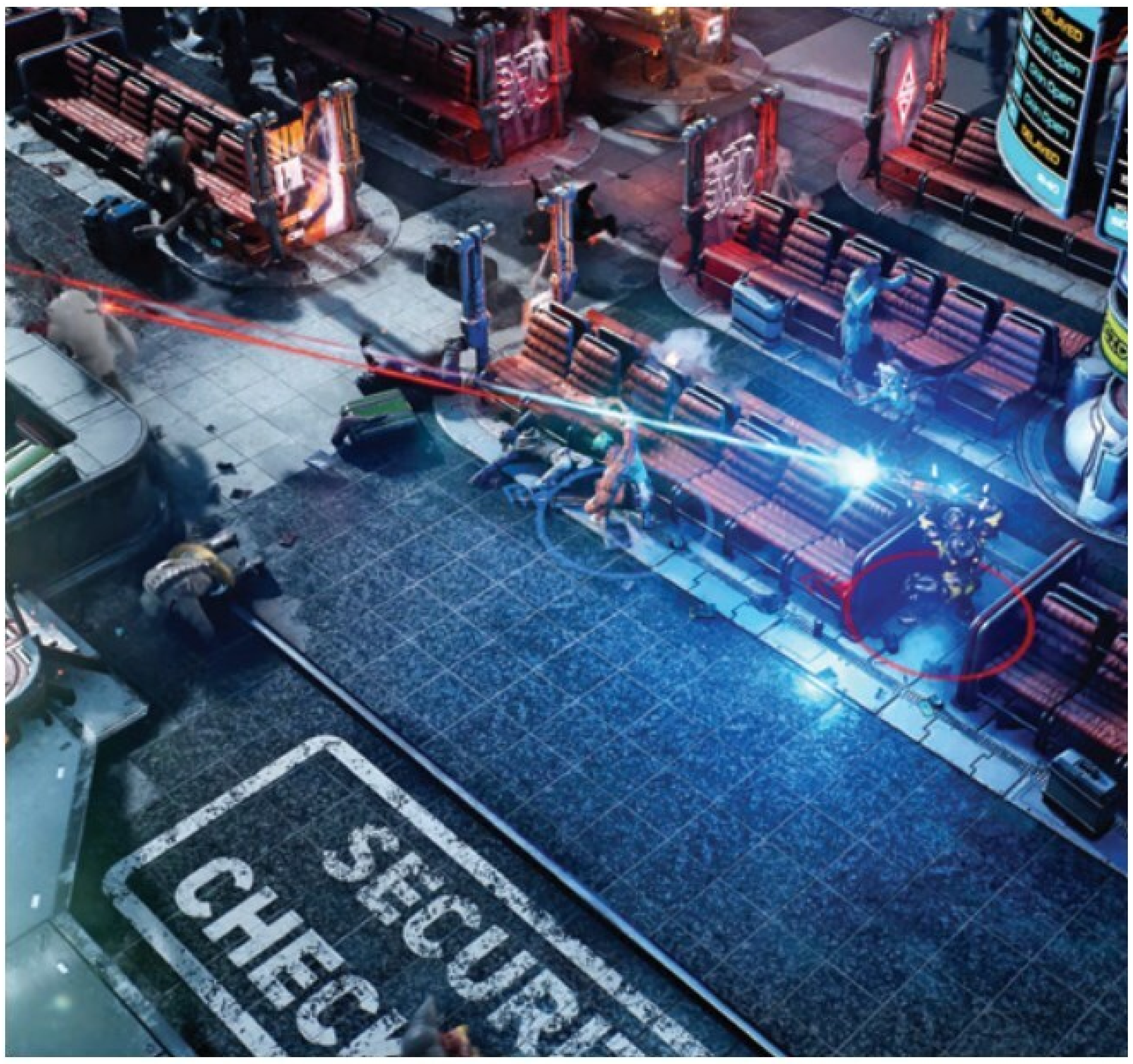


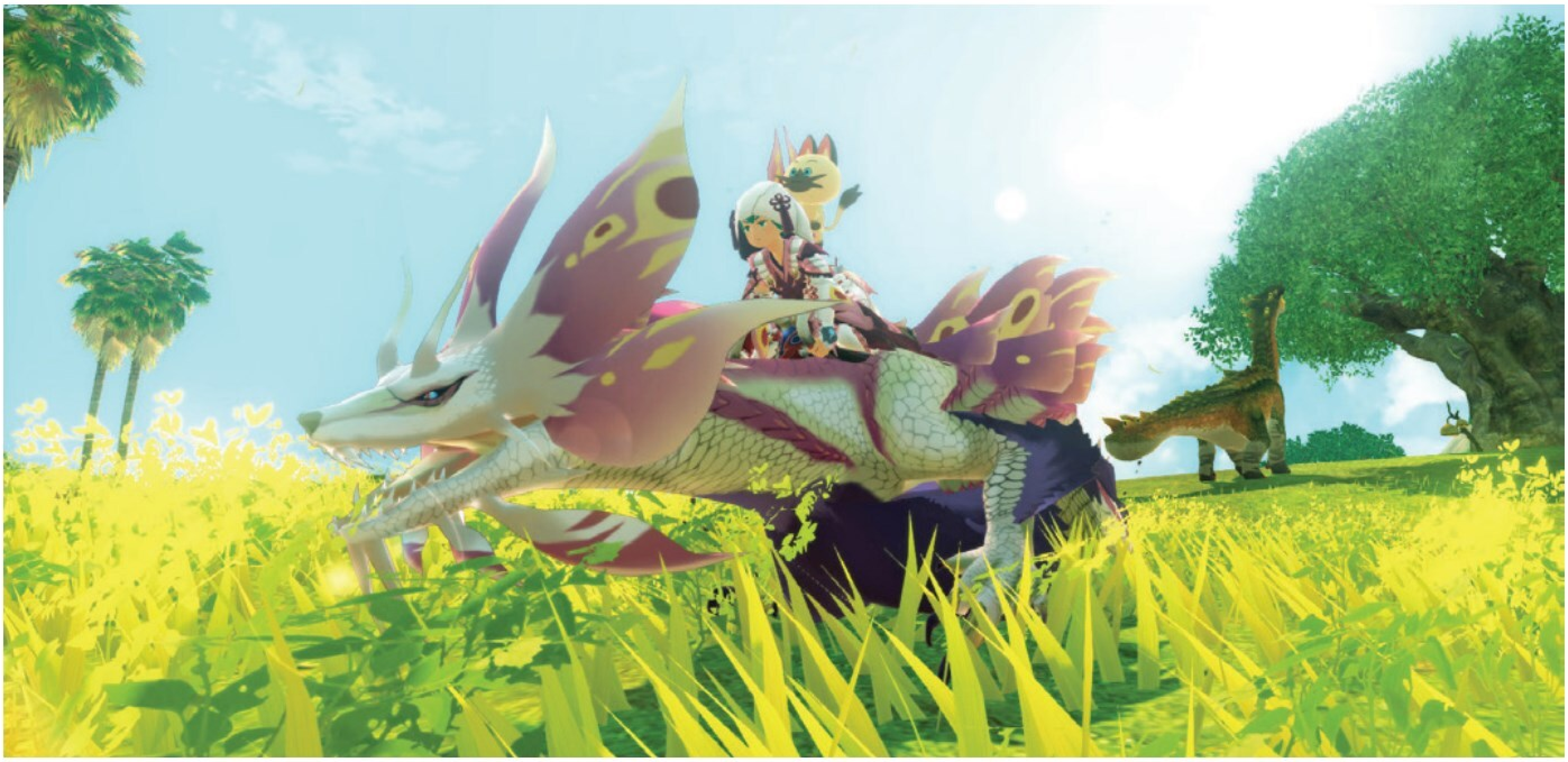
Dorfromantik

Looking for a relaxing take on city-building and puzzle-solving? The fun-to-say-out-loud Dorfromantik (pronounced “Dorf Romantic”) might be for you. This peaceful game tasks players with placing hexagonal tiles featuring scenic elements such as buildings, forests, and rivers to create a picturesque landscape. Similar to Carcassonne, only tiles of a certain type, such as railroad tracks, can fit together, and you receive bonus points for amassing sprawling cities or winding rivers. Leisurely laying down tiles to a sparse soundtrack offers a thoughtful-but-laid-back experience that serves as a great strategic chill pill. For more purpose-driven players, you can complete quests to earn higher scores, unlock additional tile types, and discover new biomes. Dorfromantik is currently available in Steam Early Access as on GOG.com. We’re intrigued to see how it evolves and hope to see it come to other platforms down the line.

The Ascent

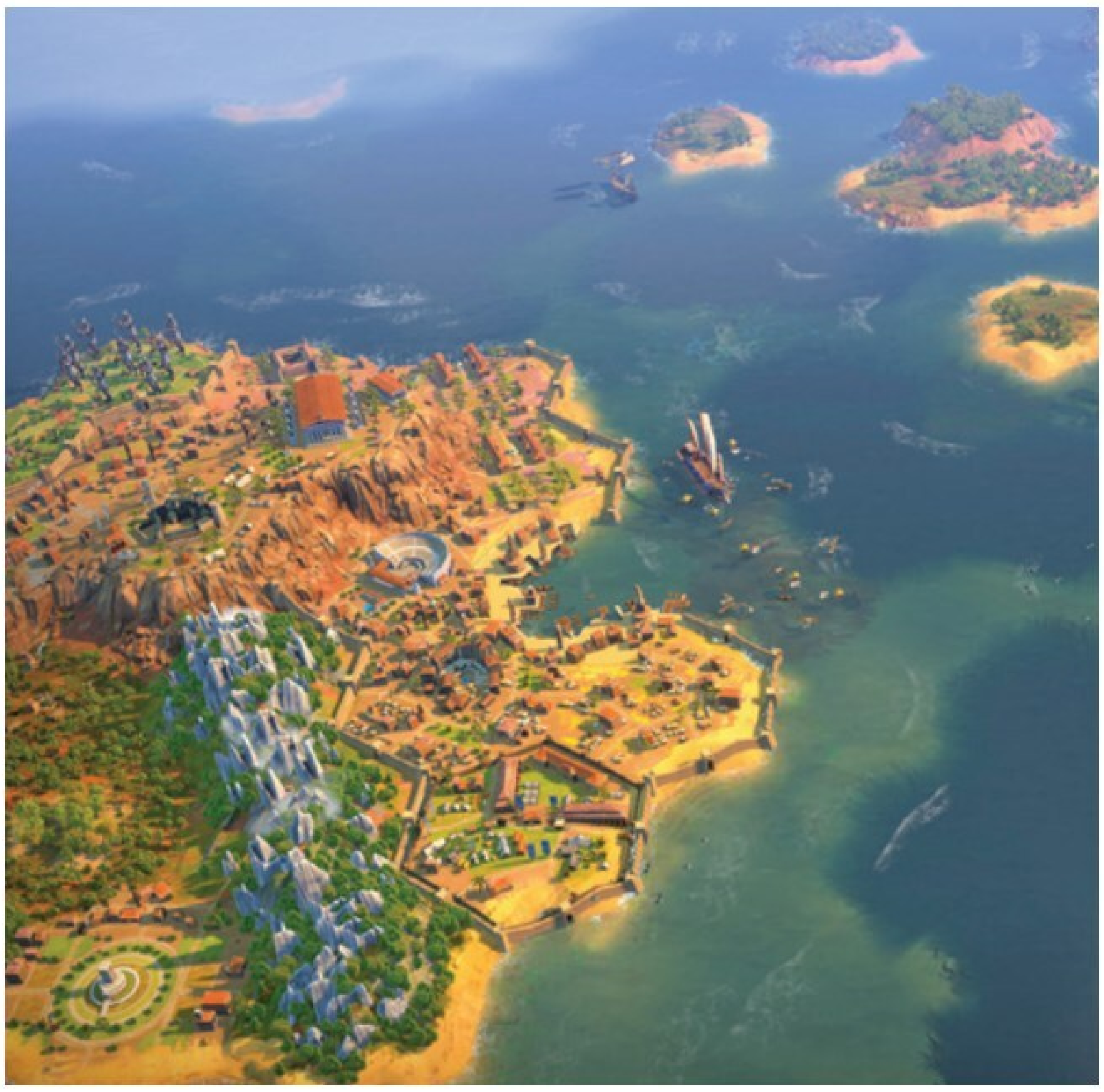
If you’re looking for a fast-paced isometric brawl through a futuristic neon wasteland, The Ascent is your summer pick. Blow through hordes of enemies with quick-firing automatic weapons or the ostentatious boom of a riot gun as you kit and customize your character. Want to hack doors? Cool. Want to dish out big critical strikes? That’s your call. With a bit of Blade Runner, a dash of Shadowrun, and a whole lot of cybernetic augmentation, Neon Giant’s customizable city-crawl is headed to Xbox platforms and PC on July 29.





Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings Of Ruin

Rathalos have started to disappear from the world. It’s up to us to get to the bottom of why in Capcom’s follow-up to the creature collector Monster Hunter Stories. The first title gave players a Pokémon-like way to interact with many of the franchise’s famous monsters without all the tension of a fast-paced battle. Are you looking to train up decidedly cuter versions of titanic monsters and participate in turn-based combat? If so, you’ll want to keep an eye on Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings of Ruin when it lands July 9 on Switch and PC.

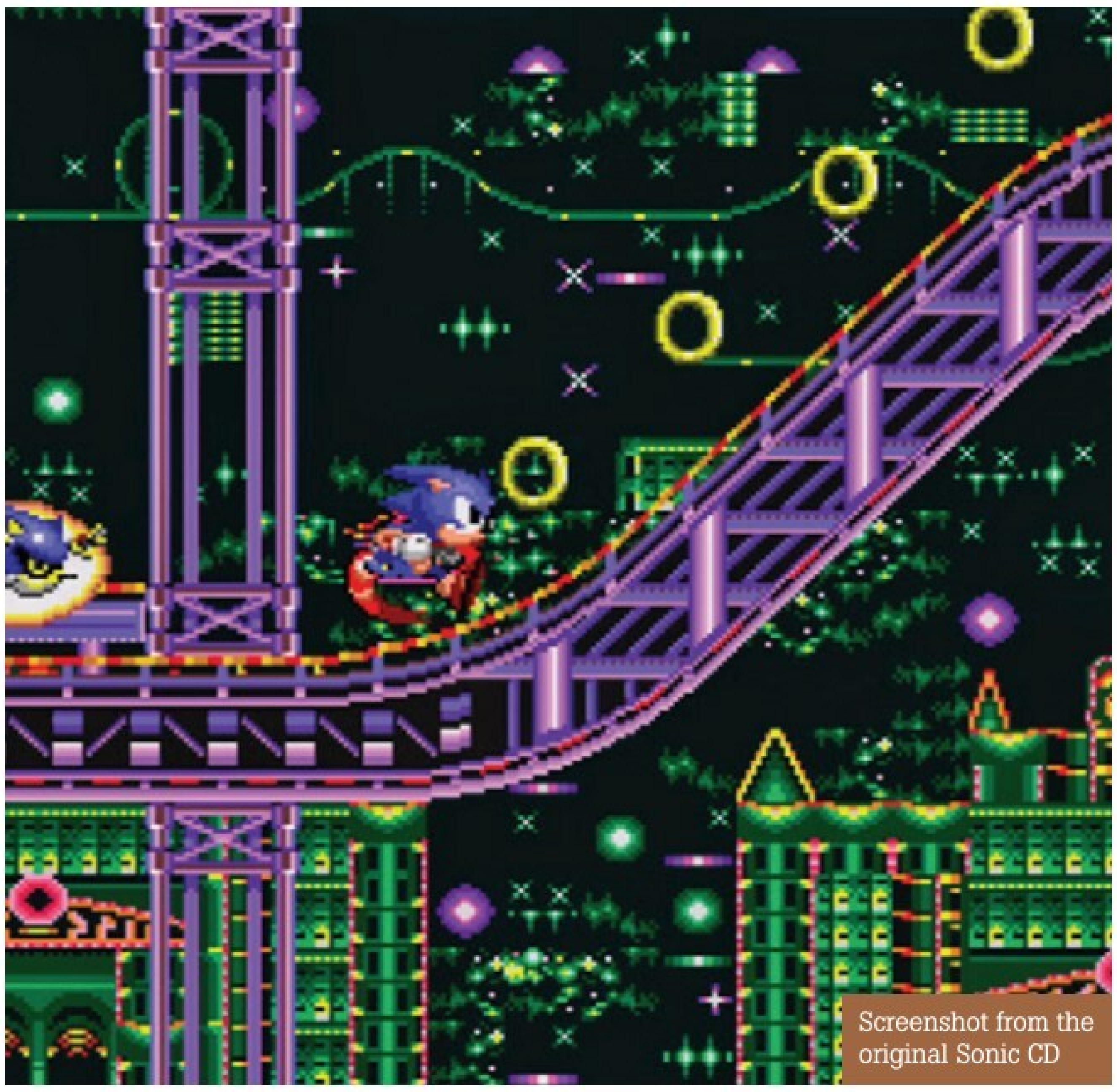


Humankind

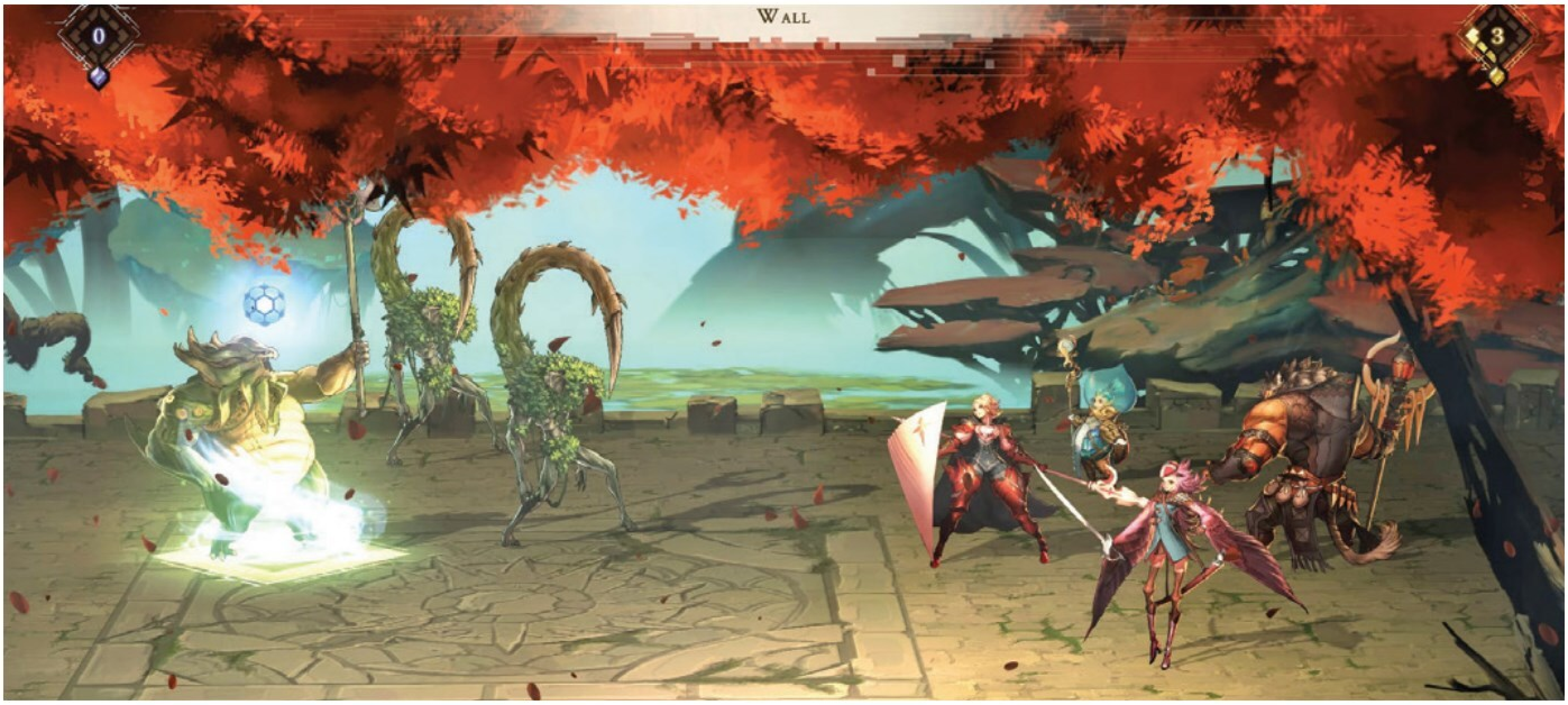
Historical strategy games have garnered a dedicated audience since the early days of the Civilization franchise, but Amplitude Studios hopes to bring a different take on the 4X genre. Not satisfied with letting you rewrite one country's story, Humankind lets you remap the entire narrative of humanity with thoughtfully streamlined mechanics. Create your civilization, combine cultures, and see how far you can push humanity forward when Humankind arrives for PC on August 17.

Sonic Origins

While Sonic fans are looking forward to the new modern game Sonic Team is working on, Sega is also looking backwards to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Blue Blur. Sonic Origins is a new classic collection of Sonic games focused on the 2D glory days of the franchise. Players can speed through Sonic 1, Sonic 2, Sonic 3 & Knuckles, and Sonic CD in a new 16:9 format, plus additional enhancements we'll learn about in the future.

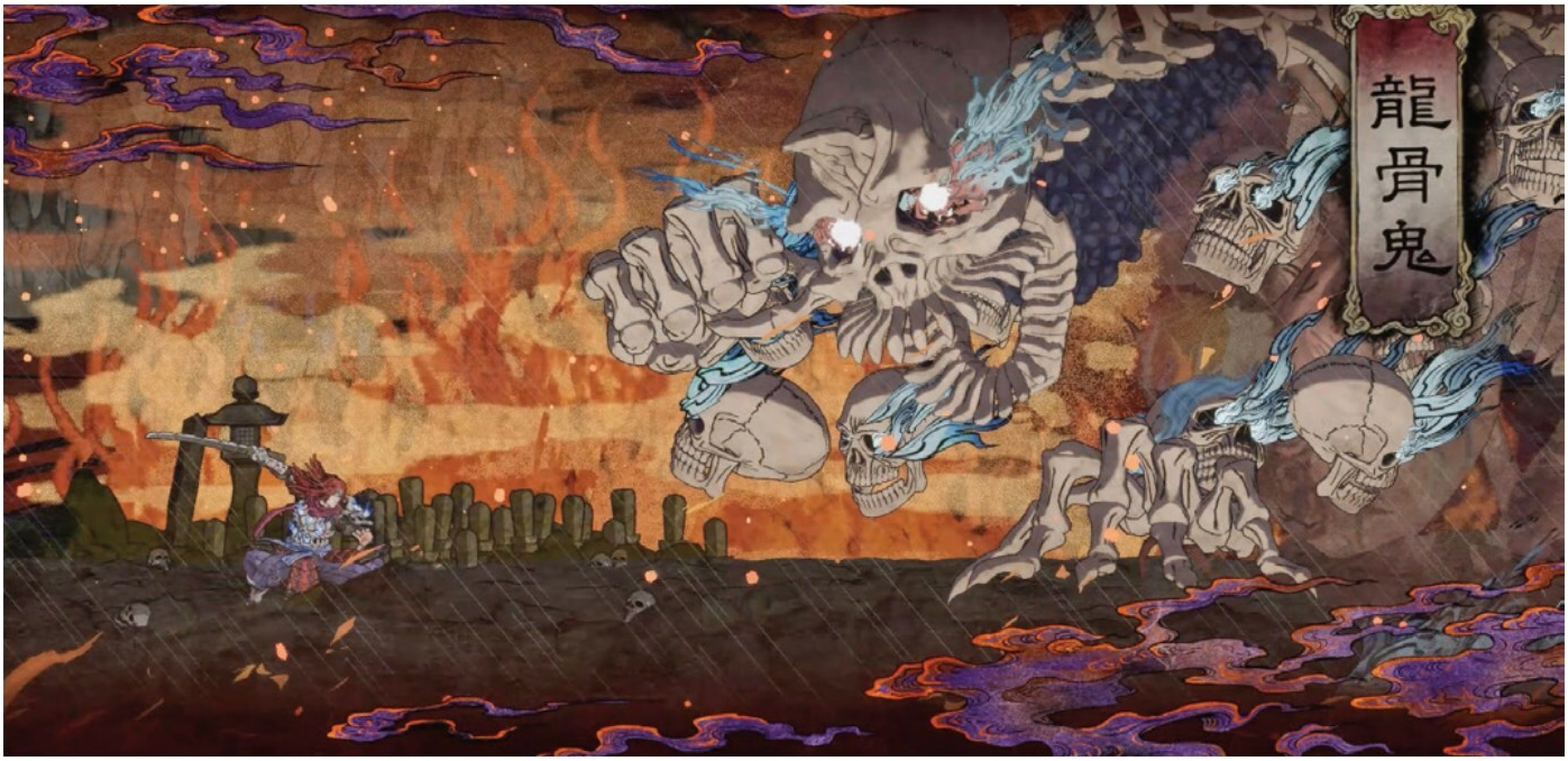


Screenshot from the original Sonic CD



Astria Ascending

This turn-based RPG turned heads with its gorgeous 2D hand-drawn visuals, but then upped excitement levels even more with the top-tier JRPG talent involved. Astria Ascending's story is written by Kazushige Nojima, best known for his work on the Final Fantasy series, spanning from VII all the way to today with XV and VII Remake. Famed composer Hitoshi Sakimoto, who provided memorable scores for Final Fantasy XII, Final Fantasy Tactics, and Vagrant Story, is behind the music. In the game, players control eight customizable heroes, known as the Demigods, who have the fate of the world on their shoulders. Battle through 25 dungeons and defeat 12 ancient beasts to learn more about the world of Orcanon. Astria Ascending hits PS5, Xbox Series X/S, Switch, PS4, Xbox One, and PC sometime this year.

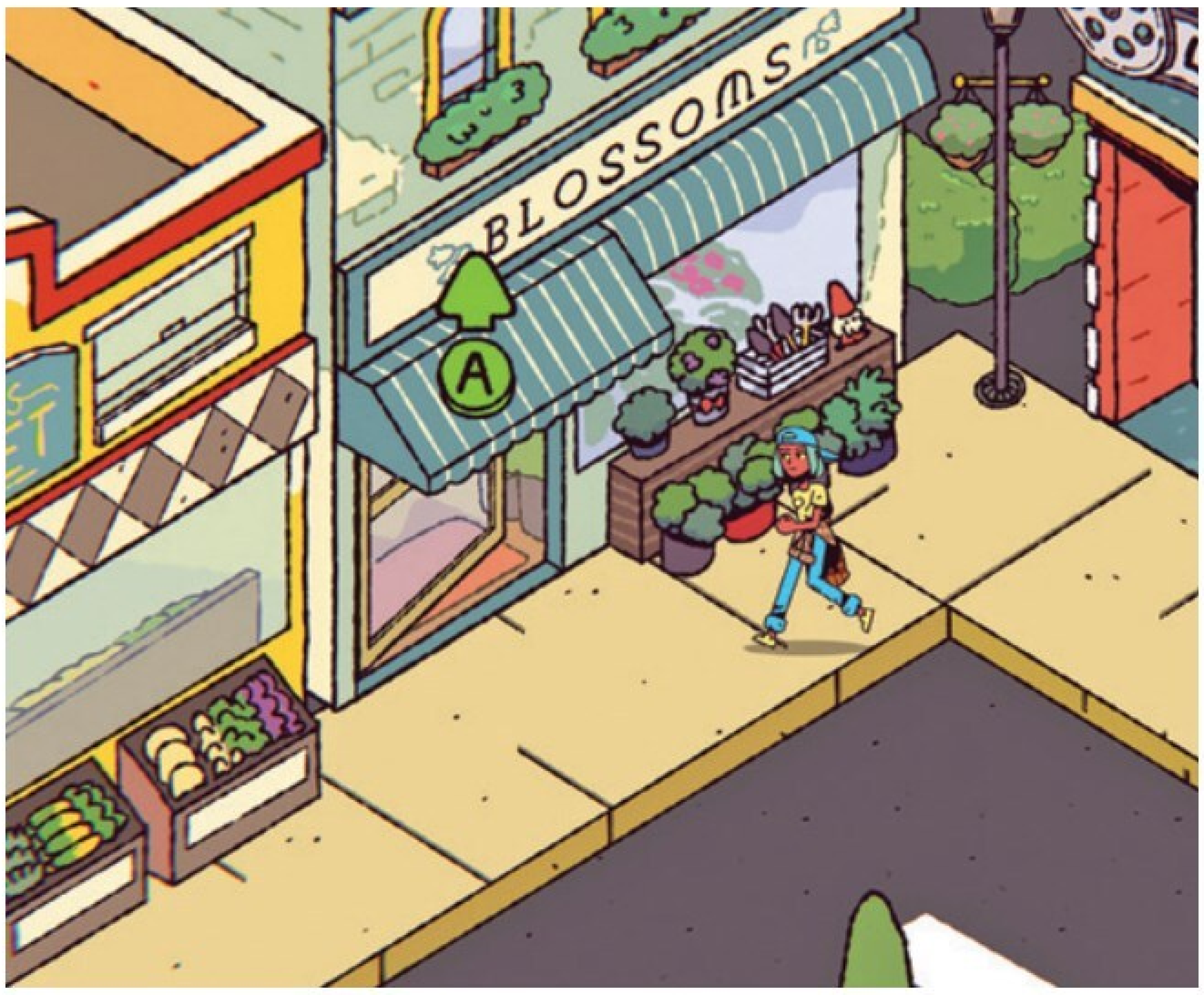


GetsuFumaDen: Undying Moon

Konami is back with a roguelite adventure through a beautiful Japanese tapestry world. Technically, the GetsuFumaDen franchise began all the way back on the Famicom in 1987. This modern outing, GetsuFumaDen: Undying Moon, features a plethora of lush levels, beefy bosses, and impressive sights to behold as you move from world to world. Utilizing various weapons like a bow, a battle umbrella, and a katana, you can enjoy the game in Early Access right now on PC. Undying Moon is also headed to Switch when it gets a full release next year.

The Big Con

Fans of the '90s, road trips, and the satisfaction of pulling off a good heist should keep their eyes on The Big Con. Oozing nostalgic charm and a goofy sense of humor, this narrative puzzle adventure sees teenage "hero" Ali fight to keep her mom's video store out of the greedy paws of shady loan sharks. She needs to secure a massive amount of money to pay off her mom's debt, but Ali is a master con artist who understands the art of ripping people off. Emptying the pockets of victims requires a skillful combination of pickpocketing, donning goofy disguises, and persuading folks into forking over their dough, among other dirty tricks. All's fair in love and video tapes, right? Look for it to arrive this summer for Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, and PC.



Two Point Campus

From the makers of Two Point Hospital comes Two Point Campus, a zany sim where you build your university, select the courses offered, and make sure teachers, staff, and students are living their best lives. Like its predecessor, oddball humor is front and center. Instead of math or biology, students learn how to joust in Knight School or make giant pizzas in Gastronomy. Two Point Campus looks like it'll be a ton of silly fun when it comes to consoles and PC in 2022.

reviews

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 337

78 Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

It's a blockbuster month for games as Subnautica: Below Zero, Mass Effect Legendary Edition, and Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart all received banner marks. In the end, we gave the nod to Insomniac's latest action platformer. With Rift Apart, Insomniac continues its penchant for fluid action sequences and creative weapon design. Ratchet & Clank's newest journey takes our noble heroes to a variety of colorful, stunningly-realized worlds full of clever level design. Turn to page 78 to find out why Rift Apart will make a great addition to your growing PS5 library.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Organization-wide Reply-Alls.

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

Mass Effect Legendary Edition

A great way to honor Commander Shepard's legacy

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** BioWare **Release** May 14 **Rating** M

Influential and poignant, the Mass Effect trilogy left a lasting impression on gamers, advancing the impact of choice in games and proving that personal connection endears players to the overall experience. It could have been a story merely about saving the galaxy, but BioWare created a rich and complex world full of unique and realistic viewpoints that factored into the difficult choices that must be made. With the fate of the galactic civilization on your shoulders, nothing came easy in Mass Effect, and that's part of the reason the series still resonates with people all these years later.

The Mass Effect trilogy is a gaming experience that shouldn't be missed, which is why finally having a remaster is such a big deal; not only in terms of keeping the series' legacy alive, but also in allowing players an easy way to access and play through the story the way it is meant to be played with its DLC. While it's not a perfect remaster, BioWare did an excellent job of updating Commander Shepard's adventure to make it a better and smoother ride on the *Normandy*, and not just in the visual department.

The first Mass Effect received the most attention, which makes sense considering that game is now a teenager and hasn't aged well. Even back when it launched in 2007, the first game was rough around the edges, as BioWare was still trying to figure out how to balance action gameplay with role-playing systems. Mass Effect's unique sci-fi future always won out over any flaws or frustrations, but going back to relive these great moments came with some unfortunate caveats. With Legendary's improvements, that's no longer the case, and I enjoyed playing through the first game a lot more in the remaster.

Many mechanical aspects have been tweaked here, from removing class-based weapon restrictions to providing a more modernized HUD, but some changes feel more significant than others. For instance, the new Mako controls made a huge difference in my enjoyment of the game; the traditionally lumbering vehicle steers better, moves faster, and has better aiming mechanics for shooting. I used to dread hopping into this six-wheeled vehicle of chaos, but that all dissipated thanks to these smoother controls.

Additionally, ME1's shooting is much improved and closer to ME2's gameplay, with smoother targeting and all different gun types being useful from the get-go. You won't forget you're playing an older quasi-shooter, but it makes playing this first game much better. The visual enhancements here hit the hardest, especially the added detail to the lush environments, which now have richer vegetation, new particle effects, and improved lighting. The structures of these levels haven't changed, but the way they've been visually improved makes them way more interesting to explore and I stopped to take in the sights more than ever before.

The visual improvements aren't as vast in ME2 or ME3, but everything looks better overall. Enemies and alien species are the biggest beneficiaries, but the trilogy's age is evident in the poorly lip-synced human faces. However, characters like Miranda look more natural, thanks to the better lighting and more realistic make-up alongside her fuller hair. In addition, most armor and casual clothes have better shine and realistic folds, especially on characters like Tali and Liara. These may seem like little details, but they are noticeable, adding to the immersion and making for better-looking games.

In addition, better camera angles help scenes feel more organic, but, unfortunately, some flaws still carry over from the original entries, like characters having stiff movements or awkward mannerisms. You also still see the occasional technical hiccup; I experienced a few stutters, freezes, and instances of Shepard getting caught on the geometry. The A.I. also isn't the greatest; sometimes your party members charge right into gunfire, or worse, walk right in front of your shot. Also, be aware that while the load times are reduced (especially in the elevators), they're still a little longer than what we've come to expect today.

Part of the fun of having the entire trilogy easily accessible in one place means being able to play the games back-to-back and seeing the evolutions and improvements between entries. I really appreciated being able to create a Shepard in ME1 to take across the trilogy and not having drastic differences in their appearance between each game. The new customization options for your avatar's appearance aren't grand, but I did like the more natural hair textures. A new photo mode also allows you to capture your favorite moments; it's pretty standard and gets the job done, but the filters are limited.

Another great aspect of this package is it contains most of the DLC, such as standouts like Citadel, Lair of the Shadow Broker, and Leviathan. Sadly, The Pinnacle Station isn't included due to BioWare being unable to recover the source code, and Mass Effect 3 multiplayer is also absent. The latter is the most glaring and disappointing omission. At the very least, the galactic readiness progress in single-player is no longer tied to this.

Even all these years later, Commander Shepard is a powerful force that lives up to their iconic status, and the trilogy is still captivating and worth your time. The Legendary Edition provides a great way to experience this powerful story, adding just enough enhancements to create a better experience while still staying true to the original. If you're a longtime fan or haven't had a chance to play through one of gaming's milestone franchises, look no further than this remaster. » **Kimberley Wallace**

9

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Provide a one-stop-shop remaster to experience the iconic Mass Effect trilogy, which includes the majority of the DLC and various quality-of-life improvements

» Graphics
The graphical enhancements are mostly for the better, especially in the more detailed environments and different alien species. The humans and their mannerisms are hit-or-miss

» Sound
A moving soundtrack and stellar voice performances make Commander Shepard's journey shine brighter

» Playability
BioWare made the trilogy much more approachable for a modern audience, especially with the updates to the first game, which include smoother Mako controls and better gunplay

» Entertainment
Mass Effect Legendary Edition updates the trilogy in smart ways while retaining its essence, giving fans and newcomers alike a fantastic way to experience one of the most memorable series in gaming

» Replay Value
High

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

Dazzling dimensional duality

9

EDITORS' CHOICE **ISSUE 337**

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Insomniac Games **Developer** PlayStation Studios **Release** June 11 **Rating** E10+

PS5

» Concept
The spacefaring duo is back in a wild and beautiful PlayStation 5 exclusive that shows the capabilities of Sony's new hardware

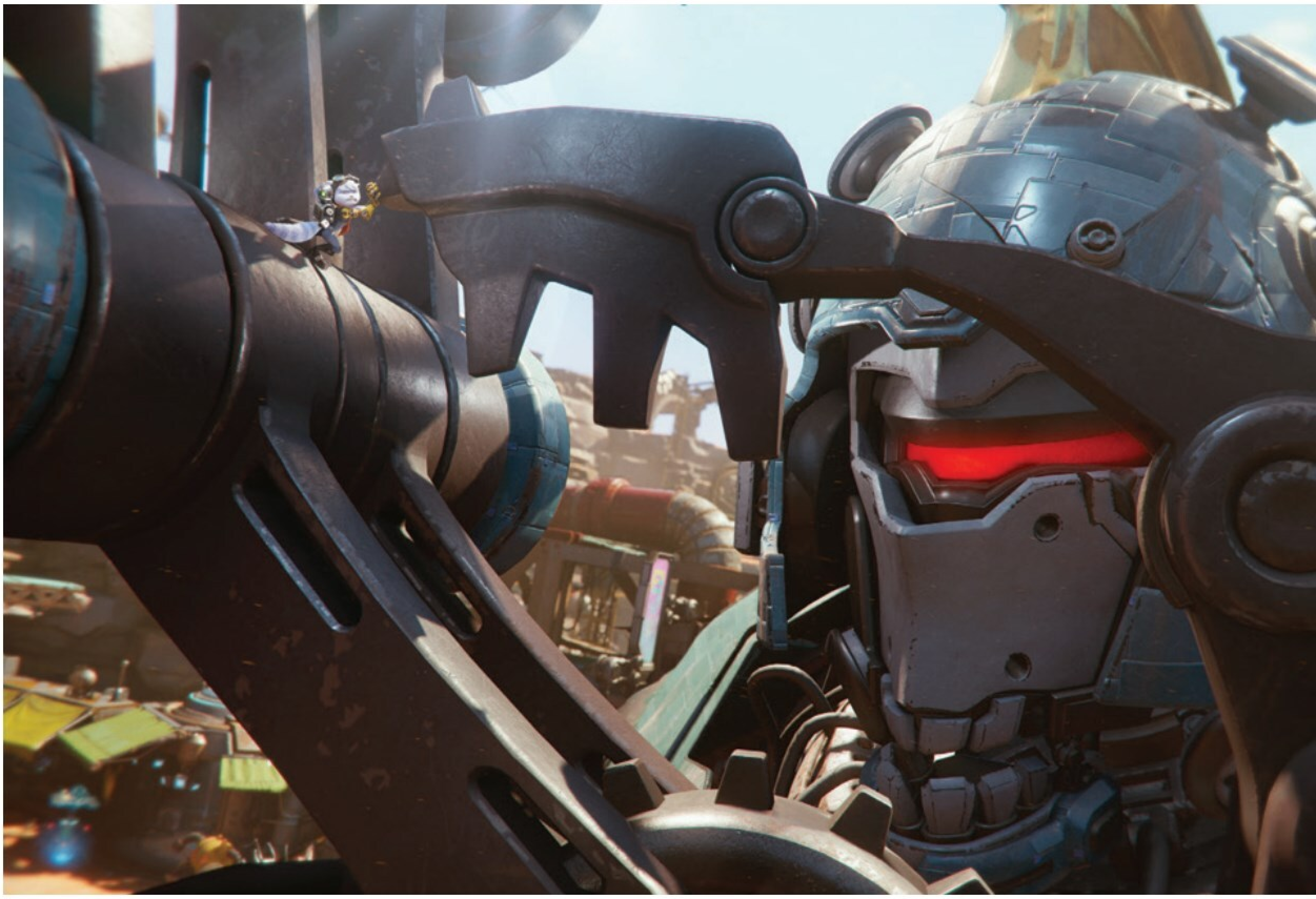
» Graphics
Whether you are playing it in 4K or at 60 frames-per-second, Rift Apart is a visual dynamo that lights up the screen with cluttered sci-fi cityscapes, colorful aliens, and intricately detailed texturing

» Sound
Pitch perfect in terms of both the thumping score and voice work by the cast

» Playability
The DualSense controller gets a good workout. The haptic feedback, adaptive triggers, and 3D audio continually enhance the already great combat

» Entertainment
It's as long as any other Ratchet game, but it feels like it flies by in a flash, and is a hard one to put down

» Replay Value
Moderately high



Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart is a sequel that clings tightly to its storied heritage, never once betraying the foundation that was laid in 2002. From the second I took control of the fuzzy Lombax again, my muscle memory kicked in, and I was flipping through the air and smashing boxes like I had never stopped. Insomniac Games made a sequel for longtime fans that hits the right classic notes, feeling like a glorious reunion, even though these characters never left our side. The heavy doses of nostalgia are handled with care but are only half of what makes this sequel a must-play for PlayStation 5's early adopters.

Rift Apart is PlayStation 5's showpiece. It checks all of the next-gen boxes, dazzling with its power, speed, sound, and control. When coupled with this series' tried-and-true gameplay, the experience absolutely sizzles, creating a fun rollercoaster ride from start to finish.

One of the coolest technological feats in Rift Apart is how Ratchet travels between dimensions. As he battles his way across an alien world, a window into another reality may appear in front of him, and he can bravely leap through it. The transition between locations happens in a flash, and Ratchet is suddenly standing in an entirely different world or reality. These transitional moments are as magical and fun as they sound, often wowing you with just how different the next world is compared to the one you are currently standing in.

Insomniac sometimes uses these quick transitions for exciting gameplay sequences, like riding an out-of-control beast at breakneck speeds through a series of dimensional rifts. Portals are also placed in combat areas to allow for quicker environmental traversal, a touch that sounds small, but adds another layer of strategy to the mix.

Through a nicely penned story, we quickly learn Ratchet and Clank are bouncing between two specific dimensions, both holding the same planets and characters. The always amusing Doctor Nefarious thinks he has a better shot at conquering the alternate dimension. Since events have unfolded in different ways in each reality, the characters could be radically different. For instance, in the reality fans know, we have Skid McMarx, a burnout surfer who doesn't do much. In the other dimension, Skid is a skilled resistance fighter named Phantom. Ratchet also appears to have a double in the other existence, and her name is Rivet, a new character who breathes fresh life into this series.

Rivet energizes the story and is brought to life through a number of mysteries that give her a unique pulse. As her tale unfolds, Insomniac delivers satisfying answers as to who she is and what happened to her. She is playable for half of the adventure, but is sadly a carbon copy of Ratchet on the battlefield. She doesn't have any distinguishing features that set her apart. The duo shares the same weapons, upgrades, armors, and experience points earned – a solution that reduces confusion and keeps the focus on making progress that, again, strips each character of individuality. Yes, this plays into the duality of dimensions concept, and keeps the gameplay flowing in a consistent way, but it also feels like a missed opportunity to change things up and truly create a new character.

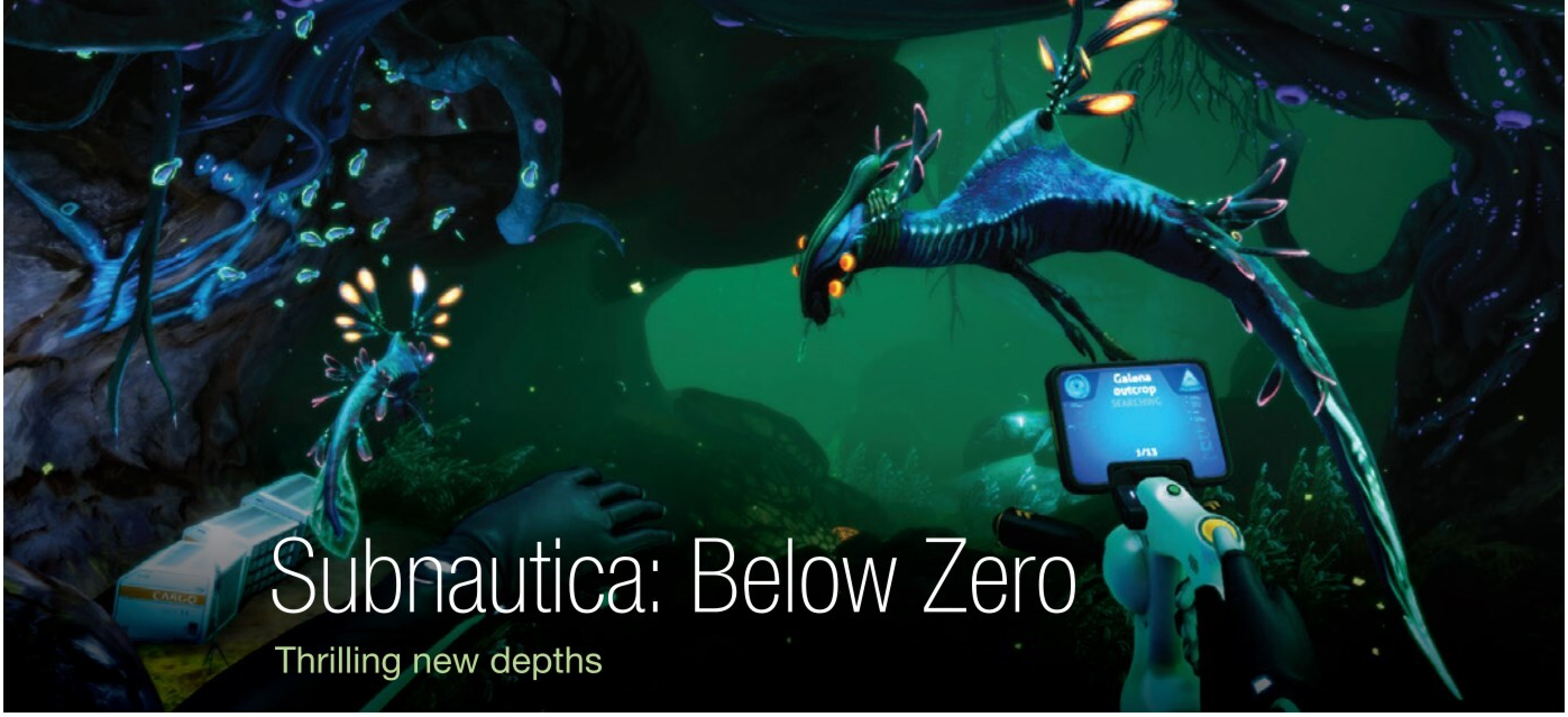
While retaining the same colorful cartoon look we've come to expect from each installment in this series, the level of detail in Rift Apart is through the roof in jaw-dropping ways. Don't be surprised if you stop dead in your tracks to inspect the detail on the most trivial of things. I marveled at the wool on a sheep, and audibly said "wow" when I saw the sheer scale of a Godzilla-sized robot that looms over one of the levels. I also realized that, given how densely populated areas are, it's a little harder to locate stacks of breakable boxes, which I consider a positive, as I was paying more attention to the environment. There's that much going on in each world. Insomniac's artists did a bang-up job dreaming up colorful alien worlds for the player to traverse. Trust me when I say you should play it in Performance RT mode (which delivers 60 frames-per-second and raytracing).

The DualSense controller also mesmerizes at times, enhancing each weapon with tailored haptic feedback and clever adaptive trigger functionality. Each gun delivers a distinct and satisfying kick – whether it's the rhythmic pulsing of the Ricochet Gun or being able to feel the Negaton Collider cook in your hands before it sends out a rattle with its energy blast. I also really like how each gun offers two firing modes: a light tap of the trigger performs the first, which is usually more precise and conservative, and a full pull basically unleashes hell.

This series has always been known for its inventive weapons and just how different they are from one another, and Rift Apart delivers a nice selection of firearms that gives the player everything they need – like a rocket launcher and sniper rifle. The most inventive weapon this time around is the Topiary Sprinkler, which turns enemies into beautiful shrubbery, freezing their movements for a few seconds. This weapon, like many in this grouping, has great combo potential, and help keep mobs at bay. The new dimensional dash is the handiest new addition to combat, allowing for laser beams and melee strikes to be evaded with ease. This move also aids traversal in fun ways.

Most missions that Ratchet and Rivet undertake are good fun, and often deliver huge set-piece moments with story sequences sewn right into them, just like Insomniac's Spider-Man games. You can freely move between planets and determine if you want to tackle a side mission or the next story beat. Some enemy types are repeated a little much (especially in the arena), but the action is nicely diversified, and the flow between locations is excellent. I wasn't a big fan of the Clank or spider-bot minigames, but they offer a breather at the right times from the frenzied combat.

I had a smile on my face most of the way through Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart. It's a great continuation of the series that is a joy to play. It steals your eye with its stunning vistas, makes you care about the characters, and is loaded to the hilt with fan service (especially in the alternate dimension and a weapon you have to assemble). Insomniac clearly had a blast working on this game and leaves us with a tease for an even bigger adventure right before the credits roll. » **Andrew Reiner**



Subnautica: Below Zero

Thrilling new depths

9

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Unknown Worlds Entertainment **Developer** Unknown Worlds Entertainment **Release** May 14 **Rating** E10+

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
A sequel that places more focus on story, reduces survival frustrations, and is all about that next great discovery

» Graphics
The alien aquatic life is always fun to study and see if you can get close to. The more dangerous biomes and depths are also beautifully brought to life. However, some items pop into existence, and you'll periodically see odd animations

» Sound
A rightfully minimal soundtrack allows the little unknown sounds from the sea to pop and potentially fill you with dread. The new voice acting is excellently implemented

» Playability
Below Zero is all about figuring out your own path and moving at your own pace. The discoveries are always rewarding, and the nicely designed biomes makes harvesting much easier than before

» Entertainment
It's technically a survival game, but it feels more like a grand adventure that is free of many of the genre's frustrations

» Replay Value
High

The depths are treacherous. You don't know what monster is hidden in the blackened waters, but you can hear its terrifying roar grow louder as you dive deeper. You know you are approaching your objective, but feel the monster is even closer. Subnautica: Below Zero delivers a continual sense of wonder and terror in its beautifully designed underwater exploration. Each dive is an empowering experience of discovery and self-preservation. When you come back up for air, you feel like you've accomplished something, unearthed a new mystery, and perhaps found what you needed to make your next dive even more rewarding.

Below Zero is what every sequel should be, building upon the established core formula in clever ways to make the new content feel just as exciting and unpredictable. Holding true to the first game, the main attraction is once again a sprawling alien sea that dazzles with its unusual aquatic life, but the survival gameplay impresses far more now that it's been streamlined to the point that it's rarely stressful or a bother. Even though I would periodically have to fry up a fish to sate my hunger and/or thirst, the majority of my time was spent doing what I wanted at my own comfortable pace and in the order that made the most sense to me.

A nicely penned science-fiction story is in lockstep with the discovery element, often overlapping in ways that impact your stance in the world and what you are capable of. Unknown Worlds does a fantastic job of leading the player along to points of interest without clearly labeling them. Audio and visual cues are effectively used, often making you question what something is or where it could go.

I don't want to spoil what the discoveries are, but many are grand in design, stretching both the narrative and gameplay in directions that make the experience even more enthralling. While I was always on the hunt for the next big thing, the moment-to-moment collection of crafting materials is immensely satisfying and better balanced than that of the original game. Some discoveries have many layers to them. Take the comically named Sea Monkey for example. You learn early on that this curious beast likes your gadgets and will steal them away if you get too close. Later in the game (and after developing a more meaningful connection with the world through a big narrative plot twist), the Sea Monkey becomes your friend and will fetch supplies for you. The gameplay sometimes evolves with the story, and is yet another way Below Zero really impresses with its unexpected depth.

I also appreciated just how stress-free most of the crafting is. In the first game, you were immediately tasked to repair a bunch of broken systems in your vessel. In Below Zero, everything is working as it should from the outset. The focus is instead applied to letting you explore on your own and build exactly what you want. That kind of freeing approach is applied to most of the game, even in reducing frustration in exploration. Yes, it's a sprawling sea, but each area is subtly different in design, making it easy to know exactly where you are and what materials can be found there (especially when you can scan for them). Another nice touch is if you die with a beacon on you, you can find your way back. The air bladder is also much more effective this time around.

Not all discoveries occur underwater. After crash landing on Planet 4546B, xenologist (and protagonist) Robin Ayou gives us an immediate look at one of the sequel's most effective surprises: true on-foot exploration. From time to time, you'll step onto land and see what surprises await you, and they can be every bit as meaningful and unexpected as anything you find in the sea. The on-foot gameplay is as basic as it comes (walk and interact), but these sequences give a more complete snapshot of this wild alien world and help change up the gameplay flow.

As more of this planet is explored, you'll develop the ability to build your own habitats, personalize them how you want (complete with posters and items you find), and eventually become a master of the sea capable of staring down a beast that would make Jaws turn tail and swim away in fright. Just know, these creatures almost always attack when you least expect them to, giving Below Zero some of the best jump scares out there and they aren't even scripted.

Some of these screech-worthy encounters don't exactly go as Unknown Worlds intends and can turn unexpectedly comedic when a beast clearly forgets how to accurately navigate a space, banging into walls and flopping around chaotically. Some escapes also are upended by graphical pop in that makes a giant iceberg materialize out of thin air right in front of you. Below Zero is a little rough around the edges, but most of my playthrough was nice and smooth.

I can't stress just how much fun each dive can be, and how fulfilling the discoveries are. Below Zero is one of the best survival games I've ever played, showing just how impactful player freedom can be within a world that you'll want to explore every inch of.
» Andrew Reiner

Knockout City

Dodgeball delight

Style 6-Player Online Action **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Velan Studios **Release** May 21 **Rating** E10+

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One Switch • PC

» **Concept**
Replace the guns typically found in an arena shooter with dodgeballs to reimagine the gym-class staple

» **Graphics**
Cartoony visuals hammer home the fast-paced and lighthearted action

» **Sound**
A fun soundtrack complements the battles, but the star here is the true-to-life thud the dodgeballs make on impact

» **Playability**
Easy to pick up but tricky to master, Knockout City offers fun for players of a wide range of skill levels

» **Entertainment**
At launch, Knockout City lacks in content, but it makes up for it with a strong base game and a ton of potential to grow in the future

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Stepping onto the court for a dodgeball match used to either fill you with excitement or dread depending on where you stood in the gym-class pecking order. The same could be said of multiplayer shooters, as poorly matchmade games deliver feast or famine results based on your level of skill. Knockout City masterfully combines the best from both dodgeball and multiplayer shooters to create an experience that is frantic, fun, and welcoming to players of all skill levels.

Joining a match is hardly an intimidating affair thanks to Knockout City's streamlined gameplay. All you need to know at the start is that you find a ball on the map, then find someone to throw it at; the game automatically locks on to targets, making the action less about how elite your aim is and more about the strategy of how to approach each rubber-ball firefight. Once you have the basics down, you can learn different kinds of trick shots, ways to capitalize on the various special balls, and how to master the timing of catching incoming balls. These matches become fast-paced, so gaining a keen awareness for when you're targeted (as indicated by a red outline on your screen) and learning how to read when balls come your way is where most improvement occurs.

As I learned to contextualize the action and strung together effective plays, the excitement ramped up. In one chaotic sequence, I was at a two-on-one disadvantage, and both opponents had a ball. As the first one fired at me, I timed my catch perfectly, which immediately gave me a pre-charged throw, allowing me to fire back at the thrower at full speed before they knew what hit them, knocking them out. Then, I dashed to avoid the second incoming throw, snagged another nearby ball, and performed a spin move to put a curve on my throw, wrapping it around a pole and hitting the second opponent from an unexpected angle. Moments like that, where you flow from one satisfying move to the next off instinct are supremely rewarding, making you feel like a dodgeball master.

All modes (save for the tense one-on-one Face-Off mode) place you in two teams of three. Teams do more than just even the odds, however, as you can interact with your teammates to perform stronger attacks. Balls gain an instant charge when you pass them to a teammate, letting your friends immediately fire them off at full speed to deliver the final blow to an enemy player. Players can even turn into a ball themselves, allowing teammates to pick up and throw each other at enemies, or perform an ultimate attack which turns the held teammate into a bomb that rains an area-of-effect explosion on targeted players.

Knockout City's five maps are entertaining playgrounds full of concentrated battlefields, naturally flowing lanes, and unique obstacles. I loved the rotating center structure of the Galaxy Burger map, while the opposing skyscrapers of Rooftop Rumble creates intriguing dynamics with the two teams. The maps are also well populated with balls, meaning you're rarely struggling to find something to fire your opponents' way.

Scattered through traditional matches are special balls that augment your dodgeballs so they explode, gain extra distance and speed, and move with moon-like gravity. These power-ups are rare in most modes, but they take center stage in the over-the-top Party Team K.O. where all standard balls are replaced by special balls. Those matches are exciting and unpredictable, but the chaos can be a little too much at times, and during a typical play session I would migrate back to Team K.O. after a few Party matches.

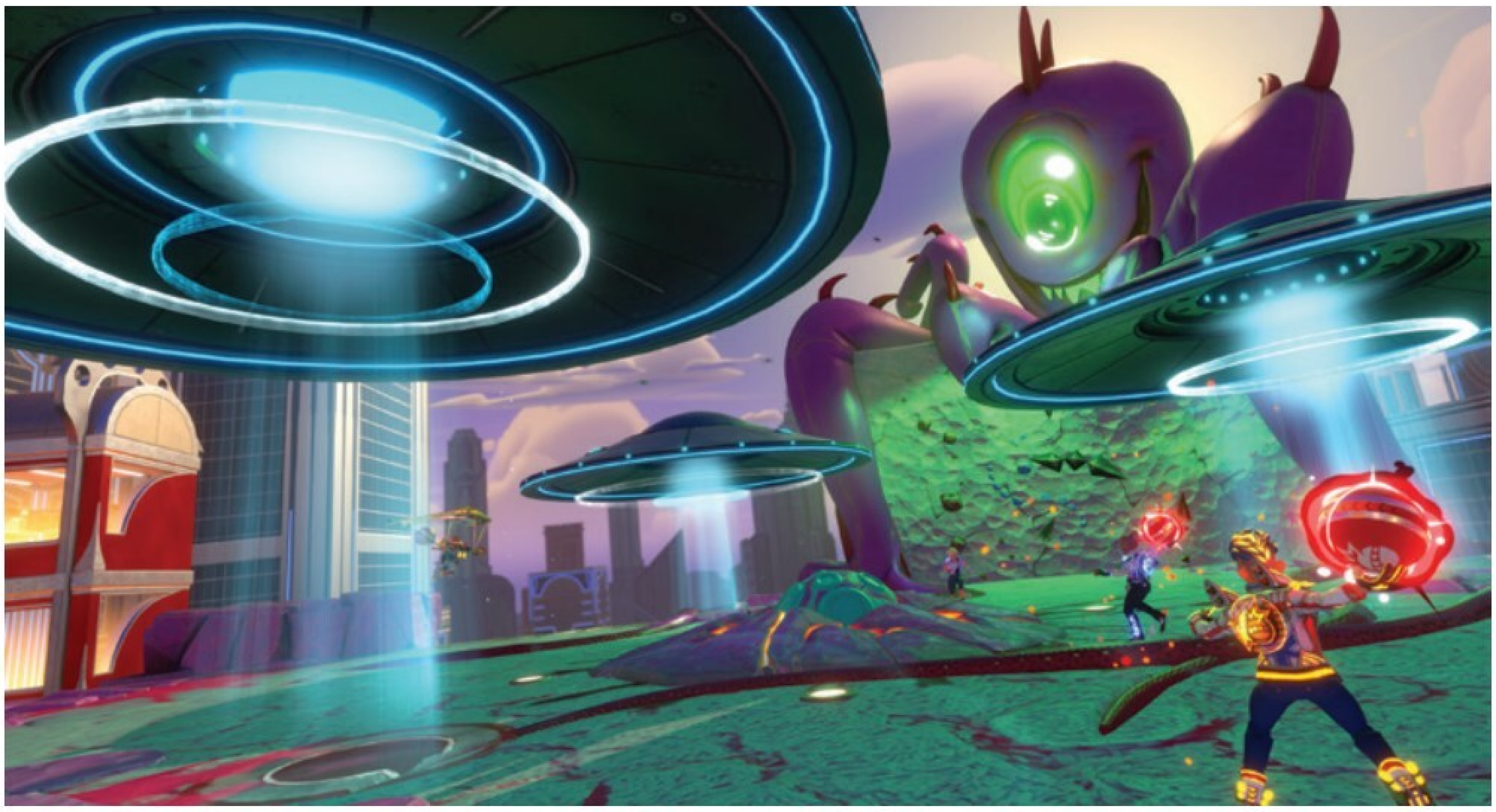
Every action you take counts toward a suite of goals listed in the menu. These objectives range from scoring knockouts with a particular type of throw to assisting your teammates in various ways. As you complete objectives and level up, you earn cosmetic rewards and Holobux, which can be traded in for rewards like new outfits, emotes, and gliders. Thankfully, all the upgrades are cosmetic, meaning nobody has a competitive advantage from unlocks.

Outside of the approachable gameplay, perhaps the biggest boon to making sure everyone can enjoy Knockout City together is the fact that the title supports crossplay and cross-progression. Without any issues, I was able to party up with PC players while I played on my Xbox. I still needed to find each player's in-game username, but the intuitive social menu makes connecting with friends and recent players a breeze. You can also join a Crew, a unique twist on the traditional Clan system, letting you further customize your character with a logo, vehicle to enter the match, and more. You also earn additional rewards and experience when you play with your Crewmates.

Unfortunately, Knockout City lacks significant content at launch. The game contains four base modes and only five maps. Developer Velan Studios has ambitious plans for post-launch life, including new maps, modes, and playlists, but that's all still forthcoming. The existing content is strong, but I grew weary of what was initially on offer after a few short hours.

Content concerns aside, Knockout City has a superb base to build off. With gameplay that eases you in, then encourages you to experiment with those mechanics to increase your mastery, Knockout City offers a refreshing take on both the multiplayer shooter and the classic game of dodgeball.

» **Brian Shea**



7.5 Aerial_Knight's Never Yield

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **Release** May 19 **Rating** T

Bolstered by a fantastic soundtrack and strong-if-redundant art style, Never Yield is an engaging journey through a dystopian Detroit that, at only an hour or so, is worth taking. Once I raised the game's difficulty, the fantastic soundtrack, fun world, and engaging gameplay made it an experience I've enjoyed playing through a couple different times. – Blake Hester

6.5 Biomutant

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release May 25 **Rating** T

Like many jacks-of-all-trades, Biomutant winds up being a master of none, and a thick layer of technical jank on top of half-baked ideas makes it feel like a case of feature creep that needed to be scaled back. – Marcus Stewart

6 World's End Club

Platform Switch **Release** May 28 **Rating** T

World's End Club tells an uninteresting story full of obvious twists and turns that's segmented by linear exploration and low-stakes action, and ultimately wound up feeling like an unimaginative afterschool activity. – Jason Guisao

Visit gameinformer.com for the full reviews

7.25 Famicom Detective Club: The Missing Heir

Platform Switch **Release** May 14 **Rating** T

As the first entry in the Famicom Detective Club series, The Missing Heir gives you a chance to experience a key point in visual novel history. However, while the new graphics offer a beautiful leap in quality, this remake doesn't alter some of the more archaic aspects of the experience, or even attempt to make the characters or story more interesting to keep with modern times.
– Kimberley Wallace

Our next issue launches digitally on 7/27

with the print issue to follow

gameinformer Volume XXXI ○ Number 6 ○ Issue 337

STAFF

Senior Director
Zach Hovland zachhovland@gameinformer.com

Editor-in-Chief
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com

Magazine Content Director
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com

Online Content Director
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com

Features Editor
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com

PC Editor
Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com

Senior Editor
Brian Shea brianshea@gameinformer.com

Senior Associate Editors
Liana Ruppert lianaruppert@gameinformer.com
Blake Hester blakehester@gameinformer.com

Associate Editors
Jason Guisao jasonguisao@gameinformer.com
Marcus Stewart marcusstewart@gameinformer.com
John Carson johncarson@gameinformer.com

Video Editors
Alex Stadnik alexstadnik@gameinformer.com
Alex Van Aken alexvanaken@gameinformer.com

Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com

Production Director
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com

Senior Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com

Web Designers/Programmers
Kristin Williams kristinwilliams@gameinformer.com
Jon Woodey jonwoodey@gameinformer.com

Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com

Office Manager
Sarah Hansen sarah@gameinformer.com

Fulfillment Specialist
Michelle Biros michelle@gameinformer.com

Head of Broadcast Production
Erik Conway erikconway@gameinformer.com

Video Production Coordinator
Allison Unger allisonunger@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Advertising Manager
Janey Stringer janey@gameinformer.com

Marketing Coordinator
Rachel Castle rachel@gameinformer.com

Partner Sales
Gino Carlomagno ginocarlomagno@gameinformer.com

CUSTOMER SERVICE

For renewal, address change and Power Up Rewards Pro details:

Visit: **www.gameinformer.com**
Email: **customerservice@gameinformer.com**
or send correspondence to:

PO Box 201554
Bloomington, MN 55420 • Attn: CIS Dept

For subscription inquiry ONLY:
800-883-8895

Manufactured and printed in the United States of America. The Editor welcomes company product information for all video games. Such materials should be addressed to: Editor, Game Informer® Magazine, PO Box 201554 Bloomington, MN 55420. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Copyright in all screenshots contained within this publication are owned by their respective companies. Products named in these pages are trade names, or trademarks, of their respective companies. All rights reserved; reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Game Informer® is a trademark of GameStop. PUBLISHER LIABILITY FOR ERROR The publisher shall not be liable for slight changes or typographical errors that do not lessen the value of an advertisement. The publisher's liability for other errors or omissions in connection with an advertisement is limited to republication of the advertisement in any subsequent issue or the refund of any monies paid for the advertisement. INDEMNIFICATION The advertiser and/or Advertising Agency agrees to defend and indemnify the publisher against any and all liability, loss, or expense arising from claims of libel, unfair competition, unfair trade practices, infringement of trademarks, copyrights, trade names, patents, or proprietary rights or violation of rights of privacy, resulting from the publication of the Advertiser's statement.

Alliance for Audited Media
The New Audit Bureau of Circulations

SUMMER GAMING HQ
Urban Trial Tricky
ALSO ON PS4
Horse Club Adventures
Chivalry II
ALSO ON PS4/XBOX
Curved Space
ALSO ON PS5/PS4
Blue Fire
ALSO ON SWITCH
Ghostrunner
ALSO ON PS5/XBOX
The Sisters Party of the Year
ALSO ON SWITCH
Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX
ALSO ON SWITCH/PS4/XBOX
GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS
EVERYONE to MATURE 17+
E-M
ESRB esrb.org

ANSWER KEY: 1. B, 2. E, 3. G, 4. A, 5. H, 6. D, 7. F, 8. C

Too Many Guardians!

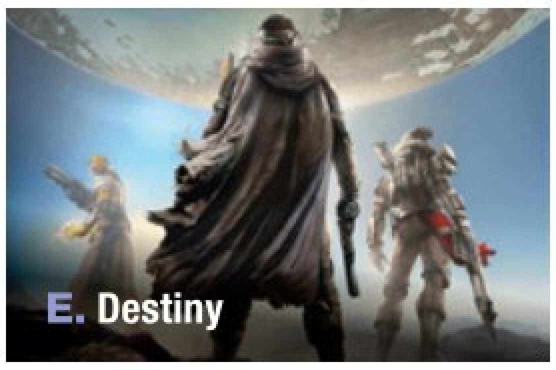
Match the description to the guardian game to find out if you're a true, well, you know. ***by Matt Miller***

A. World of Warcraft

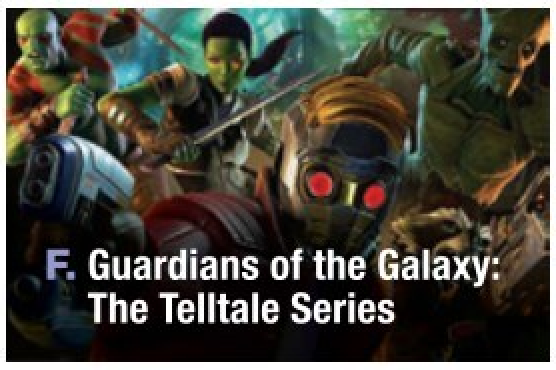
B. Dark Souls

C. Halo 5: Guardians

D. The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild



E. Destiny



F. Guardians of the Galaxy: The Telltale Series

G. The Last Guardian

H. Guardian Heroes

1. ___ Watch out! That guardian is hanging out in the Royal Wood next to all those scarecrows.

2. ___ You may be a hero to humankind, but your enemies across the solar system are terrified that you're actually just an undying zombie.

3. ___ Is it a bird? A cat? A dog? It's certainly big, and there's no way to get through that door unless you give him some pets.

4. ___ Medivh was supposed to be the last Guardian of Tirisfal, but when he helps open a thing called the Dark Portal, he may have failed in his sacrosanct task.

5. ___ Whether it's time to beat 'em up as Ginjirou, Han, Nicole, Randy, or Serena, they're all treasures in our eyes.

6. ___ Giant eight-legged metallic spiders that shoot lasers out of their eyes! What a calamity!

7. ___ If you're tangled up in blue or under pressure, don't stop believin' who needs you. That's more than a feeling.

8. ___ Linda, John, Kelly, and Fred like to play together, but Jameson, Holly, Olympia, and Edward want to play, too! Fight, fight, fight! ◆

Game Informer® Volume 31 Issue 337 July 2021 (ISSN: 1067-6392) is published monthly except April and December, at a subscription price of $19.99, by Sunrise Publications®, PO Box 201554 Bloomington, MN 55420. Business, Editorial Offices, Accounting and Circulation Offices: PO Box 201554 Bloomington, MN 55420. To subscribe or for customer service inquiries call 1-800-883-8895. Canada & Mexico orders must add $25/year additional postage. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order, or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for $12.00 (includes $7.00 S&H). Periodicals postage paid at St Paul, MN 55164-5015 and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIBERS: Send address changes to Game Informer®, PO Box 201554 Bloomington, MN 55420. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS. See DMM 507.1.5.2); NON-POSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to (Game Informer®, PO Box 201554 Bloomington, MN 55420).

Game Informer
MPLS & MINN

OFFICIAL

GAME INFORMER MERCH

NOW AVAILABLE

gameinformer.com/merch

©2021 MARVEL